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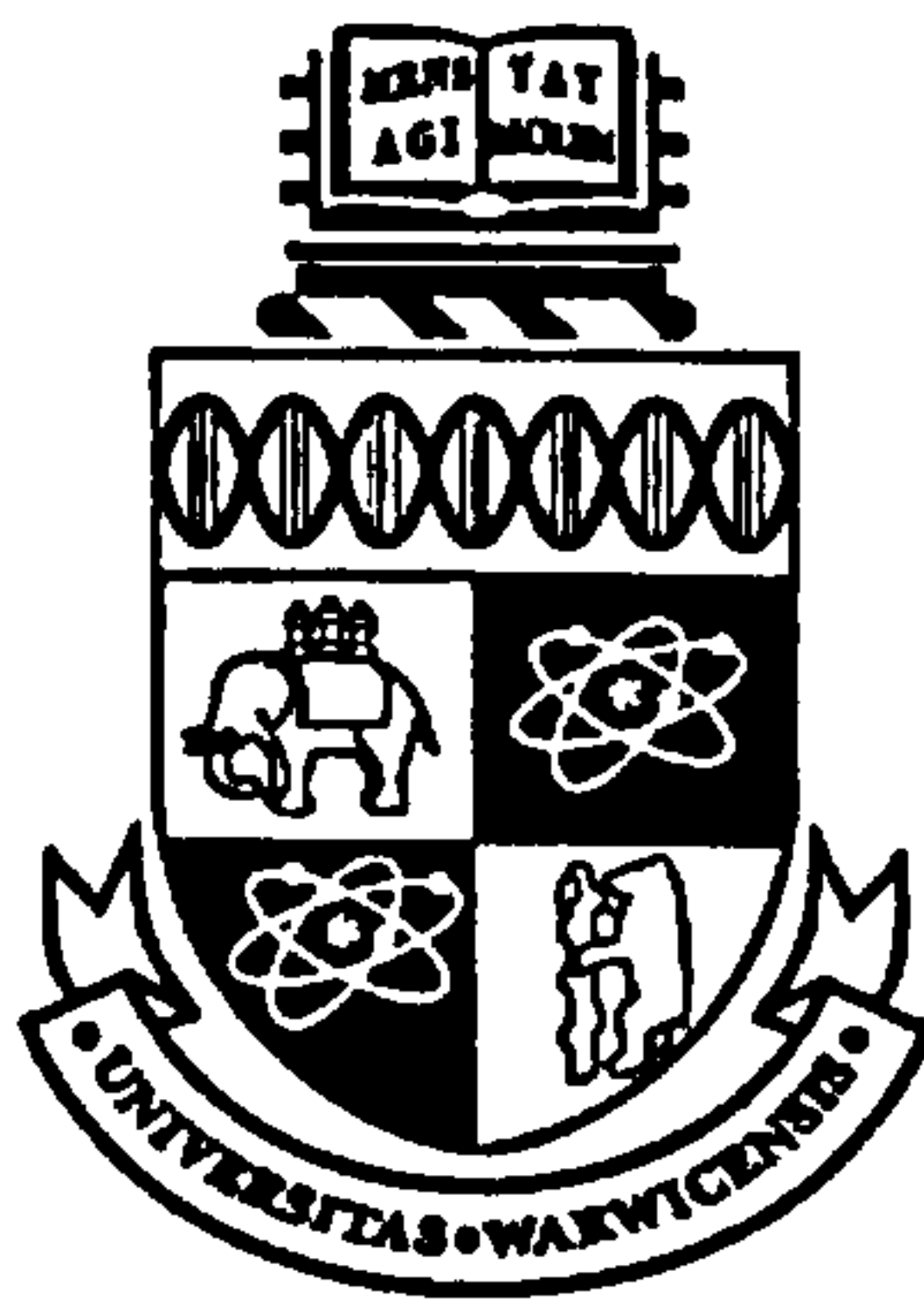
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# Exploited Edens: Paradise Discourse in Colonial and Postcolonial Literature

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy in English and Comparative Literary Studies



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## Declarations

*I hereby declare that this thesis represents my own work and to the best of my knowledge it contains no materials previously published or written by another person, nor material which to a substantial extent has been accepted for the award of any other degree at the University of Warwick or any other educational institution. Any contribution made to the research by others, with whom I have worked at the University of Warwick or elsewhere, is explicitly acknowledged. This thesis may be photocopied.*

## Abstract

This thesis examines the relation between figures of paradise and the ideologies and economies of colonialism, imperialism, and global capitalism, arguing that paradise myth is the product of a value-laden discourse related to profit, labour, and exploitation of resources, both human and environmental, which evolves in response to differing material conditions and discursive agendas. The literature of imperialism and conquest abounds with representations of colonies as potential gold-lands to be mined materially or discursively: from the El Dorado of the New World and the “infernal paradise” of Mexico, to the “Golden Ophir” of Africa and the “paradise of dharma” of Ceylon. Most postcolonial analyses of paradise discourse have focused exclusively on the Caribbean or the South Pacific, failing to acknowledge the appearance of fantasies of paradise in association with Africa and Asia. Therefore, my thesis not only performs a comparative reading of marginalized paradisaical topoi and tropes related to Mexico, Zanzibar, and Ceylon, but also uncovers literature from these regions which has been overlooked in mainstream postcolonial criticism, mapping the circulations, continuities, and reconfigurations of the paradise myth as it travels across colonies and continents, empires and ideologies. My analysis of these three regions is divided into six chapters, the first of each section excavating colonial uses of the paradise myth and constructing its genealogy for that particular region, the second investigating revisionary uses of the motif by postcolonial writers including Malcolm Lowry, Wilson Harris, Abdulrazak Gurnah, and Romesh Gunsekera. I address imperialist discourse from outside the country in conjunction with discourse from within the independent nation in order to demonstrate how paradise begins as a literal topos motivating European exploration and colonization, develops into an ideological myth justifying imperial praxis and economic exploitation, and finally becomes a literary motif used by contemporary postcolonial writers to challenge colonial representations and criticize neocolonial conditions.

# Introduction

## The Premature Postmortem of Paradise

“How can we even think of the death of paradise when paradise is everywhere?”

-Michael Wood (1997)

Scholars of paradise studies have been swift to pronounce the death of the myth of paradise:<sup>1</sup> A. Bartlett Giamatti proclaims, “All historians of paradise...have to face the fact that after 2000 years their subject essentially disappears into the eighteenth century” (154), and Jean Delumeau triumphantly insists that at the moment evolutionary theory emerged, “the ‘garden of earthly delights’ vanished. At best, it contrived to exist only in the works of Rousseau and Kant” (229). Yet when Delumeau goes on to urge readers to “reject the ‘empty yearning’ for the ‘golden age,’” to liberate themselves from fantasies “stimulated by stories such as Robinson Crusoe and reports of visitors to the South Sea Islands” (228), he not only contradicts the death of paradise, but unwittingly highlights its past and continued relation to the history of colonization and its perseverance as a fantasy in late capitalist modernity, now operating within the discourses of tourism and the postcolonial exotic. By contrast, Michael Wood wishes he could pronounce paradise vanished, but instead highlights its ubiquity and banality as a metaphor—“Paradise could be everywhere and also dead”—whose sheer profusion “is part of the peculiar absence/presence of paradise in our world” (246-7). That the secularization of our age precludes belief in a literal terrestrial paradise does not mean that it has ceased to operate as figure and fantasy, regulating and expressing nostalgia for that which is absent or desired.

---

<sup>1</sup> General scholarly studies of the paradise myth include Henri Baudet’s *Paradise on Earth* (1965); A. Bartlett Giamatti’s *The Earthly Paradise and the Renaissance Epic* (1966); Howard Rollin Patch’s *The Other World* (1970); Eric Smith’s *Some Versions of the Fall* (1973); Jean Delumeau’s *History of Paradise* (1995); Joseph E. Duncan’s “Paradise as the Whole Earth” (1975); Ingrid G. Daemrich’s *Enigmatic Bliss* (2003); Alessandro Scafi’s *Mapping Paradise* (2006).



Furthermore, to proclaim the death of paradise in reaction to Enlightenment reason and science is to fail to recognize its flexibility and resilience, its ability to shift over the centuries from a literal topos, to a myth, to a literary motif, to an advertising cliché. It also entails disregarding its implication in discourses of material exploitation and colonization, which began in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, but carried through the Enlightenment to the present, fuelled, rather than stifled, by new scientific approaches to the ordering and control of the natural world. Paradise is not merely, to paraphrase M. H. Abrams' definition of myth, "religion in which we no longer believe," but rather the product of a value-laden discourse related to profit, labour, and exploitation of resources, both human and environmental, whose very appearance of irrelevance or "death by ubiquity" acts as an added shield for the processes it conceals. Its peculiar absence/presence is therefore also a question of visibility/invisibility.

Ian Strachan's study *Paradise and Plantation* (2002) makes a crucial intervention into paradise studies by realigning the myth of Caribbean paradise with the material conditions of the plantation, providing a methodology through which to examine the links between paradise discourse and the ideologies and economics of imperialism and neocolonialism. Strachan's argument that paradise discourse "alters according to who is estimating its value and according to the basis of estimation—whether it is profitability or a measurement of worth independent of the quest for wealth" (4) can be extended beyond the Anglophone Caribbean to other (neo)colonial sites, yet the dominance of critical studies of the New World<sup>2</sup> has obscured the appearance of

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<sup>2</sup> See Stephen Greenblatt's discussion of marvel in early modern European discourse, *Marvellous Possessions* (1991); Kirkpatrick Sale's history of the Columbian journeys, *The Conquest of Paradise* (1991); and Lemuel Johnson's study of the proliferation of paradise/utopia in the "postmodern" Caribbean, "The Inventions of Paradise" (1994). Critical works analyzing paradise motifs in contemporary Caribbean literature include Beverly Omerod's *Introduction to the French Caribbean Novel* (1985); Emily Allen Williams' study of Anglophone Caribbean writers, *Poetic Negotiations of Identity* (1999), and Evelyn O'Callaghan's chapter on Caribbean "Eves" in *Woman Version* (1993). Socio-economic studies of the Caribbean and Latin America have also investigated paradise in relation to development and tourism, including Albert Balink's *My Paradise is Hell* (1948); James Ferguson's *Far from Paradise* (1990); and F.F. Taylor's *To Hell with Paradise* (1992). Myths of Eden, utopia, and redemption have been amply examined in North American studies: see Charles L. Sanford's *The Quest for Paradise* (1961); Leo Marx's *Machine in the Garden* (1964); Roderick Nash's *Wilderness and the American Mind* (1973); Richard Slotkin's *Regeneration through Violence* (1973); Henry Nash Smith's analysis of the American West as "the garden of the world" in *Virgin Land* (1978); and Jeffrey Knapp's *An Empire Nowhere* (1992).

myths and metaphors of paradise in association with a wider range of continents and locations. The “library” of exploration and conquest from the 15<sup>th</sup> through early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries abounds with representations of colonies as potential gold-lands to be mined discursively and materially: from the El Dorado of South America, to the “depraved Eden” of Mexico, the “Golden Ophir” of Africa, and the “paradise of dharma” of Ceylon.

Throughout this literature, paradise begins as a geographical topos motivating European exploration and colonization, evolves into a myth justifying imperial discourse and praxis,<sup>3</sup> and finally becomes an ironic motif. I am interested in how the paradise myth is continually reconfigured to accommodate the changing purposes of its users and the material circumstances in which it is deployed: in why it continues to circulate after the high age of European imperialism has come to an end, and in how it is transformed when it is no longer resonant as a justification of expansion and formal empire or a construct intended to obscure colonial realities. In Zanzibar, Ceylon, and Mexico, the relationship between the mythological architecture of paradise and its foundation in material exploitation has not been scrutinized, despite which these former colonies have been and continue to be represented in the binary terms of the paradise/anti-paradise. Thus my thesis, which uncovers literature which has been overlooked in mainstream postcolonial criticism, aims at producing a comparative reading of the literary topoi related to these three regions, contributing to a deeper sense of the paradise myth’s multivalency and ubiquity and further exposing its relationship to the ideologies and economies of exploitation. I begin each section

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<sup>3</sup> I approach myth not as an unchanging artefact of a permanent collective unconscious, although it has been frequently taken to be universal, eternal, or archetypal, but rather, as that which serves the ideological function of naturalization, masking dominant cultural and historical values so that they appear not to need to be deciphered, interpreted or demystified. Roland Barthes argues that myth effaces the contingent, “fabricated” qualities of colonialism: “Passing from history to nature, myth acts economically: it abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences, it does away with all dialectics...it organizes a world which is without contradictions” (143). However, in order to avoid a reductive project of simple ideological unmasking, I invoke Fredric Jameson’s notion of a dual hermeneutic which performs a “simultaneous recognition of the ideological and Utopian functions” of artistic texts (“Political” 299). Furthermore, I am receptive to the possibility that paradise myth contains a mythoclastic potential to smash the oppressive or violent purposes to which it is put (Miller “Fire” 55), an inherent instability which dislocates or defers the power of discourse and acts as a corrective to the claims of ideological critique by emphasizing the contingency of values (Bell 225).

with a chapter constructing a genealogy of paradise specific to the respective region by examining colonial literature in a range of forms and genres, including travel writing, historiography, fiction, poetry, and ethnography, and conclude with a chapter examining the fiction of recent postcolonial writers from that region, asking how this heritage of paradisaal representation continues to affect the economic, social and cultural conditions of postcolonial subjects.

By examining colonial literature alongside postcolonial fiction, I will simultaneously address imperialist discourse from without and discourse from within the nation, in order to demonstrate how postcolonial writers adapt metaphors and myths of paradise to revise colonial representations of their country as alternately paradisiacal or infernal and to resist the ongoing construction of the country in the rhetoric of the postcolonial exotic. I will excavate the conditions that have made not only the Caribbean, but Zanzibar, Ceylon, and Mexico, “ideal locations for paradise” at different points in history, undertaking a form of close reading which is attentive to the critical practices and aesthetic qualities consonant to the texts but which also examines their relationship to the non-metropolitan material histories, social formations and cultures of which they are transfigurations.<sup>4</sup>

While my methodology draws on Strachan’s analysis of the “imperialist-colonial economy of wealth extraction and exploitation” and the “anti-imperialist counter-economy [of] self-worth” which underlie paradise discourse (4), his model of the Caribbean plantation cannot be extended uniformly to the differing economies of Mexico, East Africa and Ceylon. Hence, it is a key part of my agenda to show how the paradise myth shifts according to the differing material conditions and discursive agendas of those who deploy it. While Strachan recognizes that paradise provides a “common store of metaphors” (5) within the Caribbean, exploited both by imperialist discourse and by postcolonial writers who adapt Edenic tropes to invent new cultural possibilities, I argue that this “treasure-house” of metaphor is even more portable and

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<sup>4</sup> When theorists “examine literary codes as transfigurations of material realities, they restore the cognitive, ethical, and emancipatory dimensions of the aesthetic, without neglecting imponderables not reducible to conceptual thought” (Parry “Third” 1).



intertextual than he imagines, and will map the circulations, continuities, and reconfigurations as it travels across colonies and continents, empires and ideologies. I will also examine the myth's double valence, its dyadic tendency to fluctuate between the promise of labour-free delight and the "infernal" shadow of its repressed material realities, which I term the *anti-paradise*. This shows that fantasies of the garden, the gold land, and the treasure-house are inevitably accompanied by their darker mythic counterparts: the inferno, the waste land and the depraved Eden. Finally, keeping in mind Andre Gunder Frank's caveat that "in the real world, economics is in command," I will question whether paradise discourse is merely a case of ideology masking power, or whether the myth itself generates or enables economic desires.

In constructing a comparative study of paradise in colonial and postcolonial literature, I do not mean to suggest that colonial, postcolonial or neocolonial discourse can be reduced to one determining trope, nor that the material relation between paradise myth and the quest for labour-free profit and value is the only perspective from which it can be analyzed. Myths and metaphors of paradise have been employed throughout the past 3000 years for a huge variety of aims—theological, literary, political, cultural, and environmental—and methodological approaches to the study of paradise have included sociology of religion, history of ideas, poststructuralism, feminism,<sup>5</sup> materialist and postcolonial readings,<sup>6</sup> and most recently, ecocritical expressions of our alienation from "Nature" through tropes of Eden and apocalypse.<sup>7</sup> However, it is in the economic, imperialist context that paradise discourse has achieved an "imaginative hegemony," persisting in secular form long after its religious resonance

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<sup>5</sup> See Ingrid Daemmrich's "Paradise and Storytelling" (2003).

<sup>6</sup> See Jeffrey Skoblow's *Paradise Dislocated* (1993) and Strachan's *Paradise and Plantation* (2002).

<sup>7</sup> See Richard Grove's *Green Imperialism* (1995) and Richard Mabey's *Fencing Paradise* (2005). The question of ecology is significant, since the paradise myth frequently acts as an expression of environmental crisis related to the modes of production. Herbert Marcuse first articulated the importance of ecology for a radical project in his essay "Ecology and the Critique of Modern Society" (1979), arguing for a transformation of the internal human nature in order to diminish violence in society and to preserve nature from capitalist pollution and destruction. See Douglas Kellner's "Marcuse, Liberation, and Radical Ecology" (1992) for a further discussion. Ted Benton's *Greening of Marxism* (1996) also discusses Marcuse's "humanist eco-Marxism" as a starting point for a more complex understanding of a Marxist approach to ecology.

diminished, and it is this hegemony which I will primarily investigate,<sup>8</sup> while remaining attentive to the ways in which the myth is bound up with interlocking questions of ecology, race, and nation.

## Ancient and Classical Origins of Paradise

The word paradise, for all its Judeo-Christian connotations, does not derive from the Old Testament, but rather from the Zoroastrian notion of the enclosed garden, the *pairidaeza*, whose Persian-Avestan roots *pairi* (around) and *diz* (to mould or form) emphasize both paradise's malleability, its propensity to be constantly remoulded and re-imagined, and its potential to be rigidly hierarchical, defined by its boundaries and enclosures, that which, or whom, it includes or excludes.<sup>9</sup> Paradise is thus etymologically distinct from *eden*, the Hebrew word for delight or pleasure, yet the cultural notion of the "paradise garden" of the Persians is conflated with the Garden of Eden, resulting in a temporal and spatial instability, so that the myth can signify the prelapsarian, that which is lost but could be recovered, the future heaven, the holy city of New Jerusalem, or a terrestrial Elysium. The distinction between the *elsewhere* of paradise—what was—and the *nowhere* of utopia—the hope for a social reality to come—is not always clear, since the myth can signify either retrospective contemplation or future anticipation.

From the original walled garden, the *hortus conclusus*, paradise has undergone continuous religious and secular mutations: from a terrestrial Eden located in Asia, the Americas, or Africa, to a cloister, a garden of love, a nobleman's park, or a labyrinth of temptation, to Arcadia, the Land of Cockaigne, El Dorado, or Utopia, to a botanical garden, a colony, a tourist destination, or an ad-man's dream. Ingrid Daemmrich summarizes its three primary manifestations in Western literature:

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<sup>8</sup> Here again, I follow Jameson's argument for the primacy of a materialist theoretical framework, in which other methods function as local or sectorial tools, and whose *horizon* provides a comprehensive hermeneutic through which not only class, but gender, race, ecology, sexuality, myth, symbol, and allegory can all be explored and interpreted.

<sup>9</sup> See "Paradise, n." *The Oxford English Dictionary Online* (2007).



- i. Paradise is projected onto a future life after death located beyond the measurable time and space of reality
- ii. Paradise is actively searched for, and its presence discovered, in inaccessible, exotic lands or islands
- iii. Paradise is invented or created as a literary, technological or pharmacological artifact (8)

Rather than using these categories—future, terrestrial, and artificial—to plot the myth's discursive shifts in correlation to historical processes, she offers a poststructuralist explanation of the motif's tendency to dissolution: "Like a spider's web, the paradise motif begins by fastening itself firmly to the strong, enduring structure offered by theology and mythology. But it refuses to remain attached...It dissolves...certainty, order, and purpose...into a multitude of ambivalent and paradoxical alliances that it plays against one another" (vii).

In contrast, I would argue that the motif's inherent instability springs from its dialectical relation to the discourses and material conditions in which it is employed.<sup>10</sup> It is protean not in *essence*, but rather in *reaction*. Virginia Woolf's metaphor of fiction as a spider's web "attached to grossly material things" would be more apt (44), since paradise may come "undone" from its original context, but not from the modes of production. My purpose in this introduction is not to give a totalizing history of the idea of paradise throughout two millennia, as has been done by Delumeau and his contemporaries, albeit from the vantage of studying a dead rather than living myth.<sup>11</sup> Rather, I will provide a brief reading of the relation between

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<sup>10</sup> Daemmrich emphasizes the notion of Edenic delight, stressing the nostalgic and mystical functions of paradise myth to express the "anti-paradisical" human condition (1), to structure human history into past, present, and future, and to provide a object of desire: "enigmatic bliss," the longing to regain immortality, ecstasy, harmony, and communion with divine (7). Her conception of bliss privileges its mystical and metaphysical connotations and rarely correlates it to capitalist desire for the acquisition of commodities without labour, except in a passing mention of Melville's "Paradise of Bachelors/Tartarus of Maids" (179).

<sup>11</sup> My genealogy of the paradise myth's major evolutions in the European imagination is not intended to reduce the "essential *mystery* of the cultural past" to one totalizing narrative (Jameson "Political" 19). My use of loose historical periods is born of the necessity of organization, but it is not intended to generate the illusion of "a seamless web of phenomena each of which, in its own way, 'express' some unified inner truth—a world-view or a period style or a set of structural categories which marks the whole length and breadth of the 'period' in question" (Jameson "Political" 27).

paradise and the modes of production, to demonstrate the way in which it both emerges from and obscures the material conditions to which it is attached, to sketch its major changes throughout the ancient, medieval and modern periods, and to indicate some of the gaps in paradise studies which my following chapters hope to address.

Ecocritics argue that early paradise myths such as those in the Epic of Gilgamesh may first have emerged in the literary and oral traditions of the ancient period in response to the desiccation of the once lush landscapes of Mesopotamia, which suffered deforestation and soil erosion after the rise of early urban societies and the transition from foraging to agriculture (Grove 18, Mabey 25). In classical Greco-Roman writings, paradise myths were similarly born of collective nostalgia, but provoked by a change in the mode of production and its environmental impact:

The pastoral landscape of Theocritus had been immediate and close at hand just outside of the city. The Golden Age of Hesiod had been a mythical memory contrasting with the iron time of modern men, in which labour is necessary and is admired. A transformation occurs, in some parts of Virgil, in which the landscapes become more distant, becomes in fact Arcadia, and the Golden Age is seen as present there...It is only a short step from a natural delight in the fertility of the earth to this magical invocation of a land which needs no farming. (Williams "Country" 17)

The tendency to imagine distant Edens was also a response to the deforestation of the Mediterranean isles. Those islands which remained better-forested became models for the mythical Isles of the Blest, the idyllic, unspoiled landscapes of the Hesperides. Retrospective nostalgia and anxiety about the rise of the city and its corresponding environmental impact generated an anticipatory imagination of a terrestrial paradise which could be found somewhere in the "western ocean," an object of quest and reward. However, mythical landscapes were imaginatively located not only in the West or on islands, but also in the East, particularly after the Alexandrine expeditions, during which lasting connections between India and classical western thought were first formed (Grove 21).

In the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC, in response to the Babylonian captivity and the influence of Persian culture, the Jewish imagination of paradise shifted from *sheol*, the nebulous realm of death located outside space and time (Johnston 15), to *gan eden*, the gardens of delight, a reward for religious observance. Apocalyptic prophets conflated the promise of the celestial heaven after death with their lost homeland, Canaan, producing the image of a terrestrial promised land. Henceforth, paradise was not imagined outside time, but as the geographical objective of a quest or pilgrimage and as a myth which structured the whole of history into beginning, middle, and end: first, the loss of Eden and the wandering of the people in the wilderness; second, the apocalyptic disintegration heralding the coming of the Messiah; third, the building of the New Jerusalem (Rushby 18). In the 12<sup>th</sup> century, Italian mystic Joachim Fiore reinvented this tripartite division of time, imagining paradise as a historical goal to be realized by accelerating the Last Days through the expansion of Christian rule and the military conquest of Jerusalem. Fiore's eschatological break with Augustinianism catalyzed the European division of history into the "ancient, medieval, and modern" and laid the groundwork for teleological myths of progress (Rushby 56).

Throughout the medieval period, paradise myth operated in a dialectic maintaining both the existence of the terrestrial, but inaccessible, Garden of Eden, and the existence of other promised lands, "accessible to the bold" which preserved "desirable remnants of the lost paradise" (Delumeau 9). Medieval texts such as *The Alexander Romance* located the earthly paradise in the East, reached through a succession of exotic, otherworldly lands: India, Ceylon, China. European expeditions along Asian trade routes rendered the unfamiliar in the language of the marvellous, using paradisaical topoi to differentiate and organize their experience. Although paradise discourse functioned as an epistemological enclosure in which newness could be experienced within familiar bounds, the phenomenon of the Edenic search in the medieval and early modern ages does not fit into the construct of Orientalism as a "post-Enlightenment coherence of ideas about the 'Orient' produced through the colonial experience," because it began before the colonial context, cannot be confined



geographically to Middle East, India, and the Orient, and emerged out of divergent discourses which drew heavily on Indian, Persian and Arab ideas of paradise (Grove 22).<sup>12</sup> Emerging before colonialism, the quest for the earthly paradise bore a complex relation to the ever-quickenning pattern of trade throughout the Afro-Eurasian *Oikoumene* in the medieval period. European accounts relied upon fantasies of Eastern lands as potential treasure-houses whose desirability derived from their abundance of spices, gold, and jewels, commodities seemingly produced without labour and available to the traveller for little or no effort. Medieval and Renaissance texts drew tropes and paradisaical topoi from the Islamic literature of *al'jaib* (marvels) and from ethnological accounts by Arab traveller-merchants who followed trade routes throughout Asia, Africa, and the Indian Ocean and who acquired empirical knowledge of and material profit from these “foreign” lands long before medieval Europeans visited them (Kabbani 2).

At the same time as paradise was confirmed as a geographical site to be actively searched for in the present, the Catholic idea of the future celestial paradise beyond death was being detached from the labour of religious observance and reward. Among the earliest printed documents were receipts for the purchase of plenary indulgences which allowed armchair pilgrims full remission of sin without having to leave home, thus saving a quarter of the cost of the real trip to Rome. With the introduction of money, “the securing of a place in paradise had become a commercial transaction like any other” (Rushby 85), and paradise itself became a commodity, laying the groundwork for the conflation of the religious and the material which would characterize the age of Spanish conquest.

I will argue in the next section that paradise discourse heightened in response to 15<sup>th</sup>-century expansionism, increasingly produced by and veiling the material exploitation

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<sup>12</sup> Grove argues that the “power relations implied in Said’s perception of Orientalism do not assist in explaining the early cultural roots of the Edenic search, critical as it was to the early formation of Oriental perceptions” (22). The European imagination of paradise was influenced by the aesthetics of Indian mythology and drew on a symbolic framework of the meaning of gardens “running right through ancient Iranian, Babylonian, Islamic, Central Asian, Mughal and European traditions” (13).

of Europe's newly-acquired colonies in the Americas, and that it also served to register the nostalgia and anxiety produced by the emergence of modernity, which I follow materialist critics in recognizing as a mode of historical understanding and a consciousness of social existence whose only satisfactory meaning is in its association with world-wide capitalism.<sup>13</sup> However, rather than taking an exceptionalist view of the "rise of the West," I follow Andre Gunder Frank's revisionary claim that "European hegemony" in the modern world system was late-developing, incomplete, and never unipolar, since during the period of "primitive accumulation" in 1450-1750, the world system was still predominated by the economic and political influence of the Chinese Ming/Qing, Turkish Ottoman, Indian Mughal, and Persian Safavid empires (10).<sup>14</sup> Islamic civilization held a central place in world history not only between the 7<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> centuries and the 14<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> centuries during its period of massive geographical expansion fuelled by mercantilism, but also in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, when it experienced a great artistic, philosophic, and creative florescence (Hodgson "Venture" 14). According to Marshall Hodgson, the European transition into capitalist modernity, far from being miraculous or autonomous, was wholly indebted to the technology, commercial network, and cultural knowledge of the Afroeurasian world-system: "Without the cumulative history of the whole Afro-Eurasian Oikoumene, of which the Occident had been an integral part, the Western Transmutation would be almost unthinkable. [for only therein] European fortunes could be made and European imaginations exercised ("Rethinking" 68, 47).<sup>15</sup>

Islamic travel literature formed its own imaginary of paradise as way of organizing and responding to expansion and mercantilism. Given the dominance of Asian world-

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<sup>13</sup> See Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity* (13).

<sup>14</sup> Frank reads the systemically interrelated histories of the particular regions and civilizations of the "old world" in Afroeurasia over the past 5000 years as "interrelated processes of a single unified, albeit diverse, stream of world history" (1). According to Frank, Europe prospered during a contracting phase of the Asian economy's long-term cycle, and only as a result of the sudden advantage of access to virtually free silver and gold in the Americas.

<sup>15</sup> "The great modern Transmutation presupposed numerous inventions and discoveries originating in all the several cited people of the Eastern Hemisphere, discoveries of which many of the earlier basic ones were not made in Europe.... At least as important was the very existence of the vast world market, constituted by the Afro-Eurasian commercial network, which had cumulatively come into being, largely under Muslim auspices, by the middle of the second millennium" (Hodgson "Rethinking" 68).



systems, it is not surprising that many of the figures of paradise in medieval and Renaissance texts should be received from Chinese and Indian sources via Arabic texts, nor that many paradise myths would be inverted or reinvented in order to express European anxiety at continuing Islamic expansion (as in the myth of Prester John's kingdom) and desire for the superior resources and wealth of India and China, the primary sources of capital. Indeed, many of the inaccuracies and incongruities of the description of foreign lands in the medieval literature of marvels result from the mistranslation of ideas from Arabic, Chinese and Indian texts or in the displacement of tropes from one context to another, which partially explains the tendency of the "stable dependable vision of paradise [to fragment] into a multitude of contradictory, ambivalent, unsettling multi-perspectives" (Daemmrich 206). Paradise is not purely an Occidental discourse used to construct the Orient; it is itself a treasure-house of metaphors inherited from diverse sources which Europeans would mine during the emergence of colonial empires in the early modern period in order to imagine and dominate the Others whom they encountered. This is nowhere more apparent than in the Columbian moment.

## **Early Modern Paradise and the Age of Imperialism**

Christopher Columbus, reading in Pierre D'Ailly's *Imago Mundi* that the earthly Paradise lies in a temperate region beyond the equator, became convinced that it was located just beyond Hispaniola, which he believed to be the eastern edge of the Orient (Todorov 16). His stubborn belief in the Indian Edens described by travel literature helped give him the courage to cross the Atlantic. When he failed to discover the terrestrial paradise, Columbus did not relinquish belief in the surmised location, but concluded that it had been rendered impenetrable:

I believe that the earthly Paradise lies here, which no one can enter except by God's leave. I do not hold that the earthly Paradise has the form of a rugged mountain...but that it lies at the summit of what I have described as the stalk of a pear...I do not believe that anyone can ascend to the top [...] But I am firmly convinced that the earthly Paradise truly lies here. (220-1, 224)

Undeterred, he set about (re)naming islands, casting himself as Adam in this “new” world, hailing the “innocence” of the “blessed” Taino inhabitants as evidence of their proximity to Eden and their predisposition to conversion to Christianity. The dream of the city of gold, “the ultimate capitalist fantasy,” which would later metamorphose into the myth of El Dorado, began with Columbus and his search for the island of Samoet. He wrote to his patrons Isabella and Ferdinand, “Gold is most excellent. Gold constitutes treasure, and anyone who has it can do whatever he likes in this world. With it, he can succeed in bringing souls to Paradise” (300). In *Capital* Marx emphasizes the significance of gold-money to nascent European capitalism as that “absolutely social form of wealth” which could be exchanged for any commodities without the time and labour of production (229). Columbus’ speech signals the transformation of the medieval dialectic between the geographical Eden and exotic lands of plenty into a discursive notion of paradise as the labour-free acquisition of capital, a compelling metaphor both for wealth and the religious-political idea of a realm where “interactions between people and nature could be morally defined and circumscribed” (Grove 2). The colonial expansion triggered by the Columbian “discovery” of the New World was henceforth comprised of spiritual mission inextricably linked to material conquest.

However, Columbus’s failure to find “infinite gold” on any of his four journeys raises the question of how paradisaic discourse of the Caribbean persisted if it was no longer compelling as an image of immediate wealth. The myth survived because it legitimated European domination of the Amerindians, and even more crucially, because forced-labour enabled the persistence of the fantasy of work-free production and profit: “If there were ‘gold fields’...or silver mines inland, or pearls on the sea floor, the Spaniard could still acquire this wealth without working. ‘Paradise’ was saved as a concept, a metaphor, and myth by the blood and sweat of the Taino and the African” (Strachan 27). The paradise myth was therefore firmly attached to the

Caribbean's status as a cornerstone of the European "primitive accumulation" of wealth.<sup>16</sup>

Henri Baudet's pioneering study of the role of paradise discourse in mediating the European encounter with "non-European man" argues that the idea of the noble savage "influenced European expansion to the west in the sixteenth century, but it failed to prevent the wholesale massacres that accompanied this expansion. The myths covered the distant earthly paradise with a veil of enchantment...but formed no hindrance to their intensive and ruthless economic exploitation" (54). However, Baudet's claim that "irrationality induced expansion" in the Americas fails to recognize that colonial expansion was motivated by the reasoned pursuit and accumulation of wealth, by the need for new territory for constricted European states, and by the scientific pursuit of knowledge (Strachan 21-2). Europeans were not drunk on the myth of paradise, to paraphrase Coleridge, but rather, the myth of paradise concealed their lust for wealth. It was precisely because the Caribbean was represented as an ideal realm, beyond the rules of humanity and reality, that it could be subjected to ruthless exploitation.

Furthermore, the concept of paradise which developed after Columbus was not mystical but rational, rooted in the pastoral vision of bountiful nature ordered and working for Europeans, as opposed to the idea of the uncultivated wasteland, a "place in need of domination" (Strachan 21). Like the botanical gardens developed

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<sup>16</sup> As Marx writes, "the discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population, the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of black-skins, signalized the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production" (823). However, the Caribbean fantasy of work-free profit must be distinguished from the North American utopian projects catalyzed by the Protestant Reformation's redefinition of labour from a sign of the fall into a means of redemption. The language of new covenants, settlements, and plantations—John Winthrop's "City on a Hill"—which characterizes New England Puritan discourse bears witness to this urge to build New Jerusalem. Roderick Nash argues in *Wilderness and the American Mind* that the Puritans, reading the Old Testament literally, saw wilderness not as an Elizabethan park, but rather as the antipode to the Garden of Eden, a "cursed" land, the "environment of evil," a "kind of hell" on earth. The settlers cast the American continent as a vast "wilderness environment" which it was their destiny to redeem from evil. However, even if Puritans were not fuelled by the same fantasies of economic gold-mines, their imagination of North America as a empty Eden to be realized through European effort was nonetheless used to justify their appropriation of indigenous Amerindian land for their own profit, and of course, the tobacco plantations of the South show that such fantasies were rife in the rest of North America.



throughout the Islamic world, or Giovanni Bellini's painting *Allegory of Earthly Paradise* (1490), which depicted an ornate, stylized garden, a vision of "mastered, if totally artificial, 'nature'" (Sale 80), paradise represented ornamentation, cultivation, and design. In the New World, it was the artificial, rational product of human mastery: the plantation colony. Constructing themselves as "modern," Europeans rationalized their entitlement to subdue the land and its "backwards" inhabitants.<sup>17</sup> In response to Amerindian resistance, paradise discourse polarized: those who refused to labour for the Europeans ceased to be "blessed," becoming "lazy savages" who needed to be exterminated to make way for the transformation of wasteland into paradise. Likewise in New England, an emphasis on the Edenic fecundity of the land as characterized by Thomas Morton's portrait in *New English Canaan* (1632) of "delicate fair large plains," "goodly groves of trees," and "sweet crystal fountains," (52-3) gave way by 1641 to the colonists' perception of a flawed paradise teeming with "savage barbarians," as in Plymouth Governor William Bradford's bitter description of "a hideous and desolate wilderness full of wild beasts and wild men" (62). Yet, while the colonists in the Americas increasingly infernalized their surroundings, the American Eden continued to be romanticized in England by poets such as Andrew Marvell.<sup>18</sup> As long as the fantasy of labour-free profit and accumulation of wealth persisted, paradise discourse survived, incorporating the trope of the plantation when the age of exploration, conquest and piracy came to end and the means of production were transformed.

Carlos Fuentes writes that "throughout the history of the New World, the dream of paradise and the noble savage has coexisted with the history of colonization and forced labour," so that "from the earthly paradise, America...quickly become the

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<sup>17</sup> The distinction between modern and savage, civilized and barbaric runs back to the ancient Greeks and Herodotus's imagination of uncivilized Others. However, the line of thought runs not only from the classical Greeks and Romans up through European discourse, but also throughout the Islamic tradition, as I will show in Chapter Four. For more on the ways in which Europeans constructed and represented the alterity of indigenous Amerindians, see Peter Hulme's *Colonial Encounters* (1986), and Tzvetan Todorov's *Conquest of America* (1984).

<sup>18</sup> Marvell's poem "Bermudas" (1657) was inspired by his wealthy patrons, the Oxenbridges, former Bermudan settlers whom plantation money had enabled to buy an extravagant manor house and English lifestyle (Rushby 145).

hostile continent” (“Buried” 126). The repressed realities of material exploitation and indigenous resistance were incorporated into the trope of the *anti-paradise*, accommodating the gap between the rational image of the New World as characterized by purity, innocence and order and the colonists’ actual experience through the image of a “fallen” or “depraved” Eden which defied European desires. This allowed the Americas to be represented as a tropically decadent “white man’s graveyard” in which all the horrors of disease, natural disaster, and mental breakdown confronted colonists, while preserving the fantasy of paradise and the reality of the plantation.<sup>19</sup> In my chapters on Mexico, I will show how the myth of the country as “infernal paradise” became a crucial element not only of the colonial imaginary, but of the national culture, reflecting the inequalities perpetrated by the Conquest and perpetuated by the hacienda economy.

From the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards, rhetoric of paradise increasingly appeared outside the context of the New World in connection with other potential “treasure-lands”—the African gold-land of Ophir, the ivory-lands of the Congo, the pearl-beds of Ceylon—anywhere European colonizers believed they could acquire raw materials without working. Even after the 19<sup>th</sup>-century abolition of the slave-trade, colonizers employed indentured labour to run the tea plantations and pearl-diving stations of Ceylon and hired slaves from Zanzibar to travel with them into the interior of East Africa. In the rhetoric of colonization and conquest, paradise operates on various levels, as a descriptor of “new” landscapes, a plan for colonies, or an earthly kingdom of God into which indigenous people should be inducted, but always it acts as a justification for the exploitation of peoples and raw materials. Paradise discourse is confined to neither the Caribbean nor the plantation, and in the following chapters I will question how and why it was transformed yet again and extended to Mexico,

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<sup>19</sup> However, I follow Strachan in taking issue with Richard Dunn’s *Sugar and Slaves* (1973) for insisting that initial paradisaical representations of the Americas were wholly replaced by negative tropes after Europeans experienced the empirical reality of the colonies. The Caribbean’s reputation as “graveyard for whites” did not kill off fantasies of paradise, but rather persisted alongside it, resulting in the double valency which I term the anti-paradise. In contemporary tourist discourse, the emphasis on sand, sun, and luxury has once more effaced the myth of tropical graveyard.



Zanzibar and Ceylon, only three of many sites which became possible paradises as European imperialism extended beyond the New World to Africa and Asia.

The beginnings of European modernity were marked by a dawning recognition of the impossibility of returning to the Golden Age or discovering the terrestrial paradise. However, the Renaissance also saw the proliferation of “collective fantasies” such as the Land of Cockaigne and the Fountain of Youth, and an increasing infatuation with the complicated, anti-natural aesthetic of the botanical garden, leading Delumeau to conclude, “people created artificial paradises for themselves because they know that the real one had disappeared” (135). This detachment of paradise from the conventions of innocence, simplicity and primordial origin resulted in a troubled notion of the “artificial paradise,” condemned by theologians for denying the world’s true nature as a “vale of wretchedness” and associated in literary texts with the decadence, deceptions, and snares of female sorcerers and Oriental tyrants.<sup>20</sup> Offering illusory sensual delights and material riches in order to trap unwary pilgrims in its walls, the false paradise embodied the dangers of material desire. This was the dark side of “nature mastered by man”: the artificial paradise as a torture garden with concealed mechanisms, a nightmare which intimated that scientific knowledge could be put to irrational, violent ends. Literary labyrinths reflected the plasticity and artificiality of paradise discourse and its uncanny ability to conceal abuse.<sup>21</sup>

Hieronymus Bosch’s altar triptych, “The Garden of Earthly Delights” (1504), dramatically captures the dangers and attractions of the artificial paradise (see Figure 1). Man, evicted from the holy “Garden of Delights” (first panel), lusts to return to it,

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<sup>20</sup> As in the epic of Alcina, legends of the Paradise of Assassins, or Mandeville’s Gathonolonabes. In each of these examples, the manipulation of nature by an Other, female, Arab, or Asian presents a discomfiting challenge to male European power and knowledge.

<sup>21</sup> The 17<sup>th</sup> c. Sicilian priest Agostino Inveges, reflecting on the profusion of books on the subject, argued that “‘paradise’ might be called a labyrinth rather than a garden” (cited in Delumeau 145). Inveges’ metaphor of the labyrinth, a garden which conceals a devouring Minotaur, suggests an uncanny association with empire. Reflecting on the Palace of Versailles, Ben Okri writes, “The rich and powerful try to create Arcadia and only end up constructing a labyrinth” (“Arcadia” 174). Daemmrich notes ambivalence of the signifiers of the artificial paradise: “Gold signifies the purity and opulence of a paradisiacal setting. But it can also introduce corrupting materialism. Walls, mountains, and other barriers both protect and restrict paradisiacal space. [...] Though paradise and evil would seem to be mutually exclusive, evil can not only penetrate paradise but create it” (Daemmrich 206).

and therefore constructs a carnal pleasure garden, the “Garden of Earthly Delights” (second panel) which leads to hell (third panel). The false paradise is artificially productive, teeming with bodies indulging in sexual acrobatics, but there are no actual children, no harvests, only the obscenely huge fruits looming above the heads of the copulating bodies. This is no City of God, nor earthly Eden, only a lewd distortion, the fantasy of the fallen self that believes paradise can be re-made in man’s image and for man’s pleasure. Paradise, in Bosch’s triptych, inevitably progresses from the Edenic to the artificial to the infernal. Although Delumeau and Daemmrich have interpreted the triptych theologically, it also functions as a powerful critique of the European fantasy of labour-free production and of the impulse to construct new Edens, colonies, or utopias. The space of the artificial paradise is like the colonial landscape, overwritten by exotic signs—both of the paradisiacal (fountains, sporting bodies, apparent abundance) and the infernal (the voyeur in the glass, the rats, the Icarus plummeting to hell on the far right). The search for paradise inevitably leads to the portrayal of an anti-paradise, whether as a recognition of the inferno of conquest and exploitation which underlies the construction of the false paradise, or in the complicity of writers in perpetuating that exploitation through the violence of representation.

Jeffrey Knapp attributes the flowering of literary utopias such as Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516) and Spenser’s *Faerie Queen* (1590-6) as a response to the widening global framework of trade and travel and the complexities of empire. Tropical islands and colonies were used as symbolic locations on which to project the contradictions of European expansion: on one hand, these idealized landscapes served an mental, imaginary purpose, enabling the projection of Western aspirations for progress, social, political or economic redemption, and the accumulation of wealth, but on the other, they represented the material realities of the colonies to a reading public increasingly prepared to make dyadic comparisons. Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* (1611) is perhaps the most trenchant exploration of the contradictions between the idea of the island as Eden or Utopia and the island as the site of encounter between the European and the indigenous “Other.”





Figure 1 : Hieronymus Bosch. "The Garden of Earthly Delights" (1504). Il Prado.



The dialogue between Antonio, Adrian, Gonzalo, and Sebastian oscillates between the fantasy of the island as a labour-free paradise and its empirical complexity as a place “beset by risks, by drought, disease, and native peoples,” (Grove 35) with Antonio’s and Sebastian’s wry observations undermining Gonzalo’s utopian notion of plantation (Strachan 39). The fluctuation between paradise and anti-paradise reflects the 17<sup>th</sup>-century aesthetic transition away from the mystical or supernatural towards empirical knowledge of the negative realities of the colonies and predicts the rise of scientific knowledge through Prospero’s move from magic to “natural” science. Only Prospero’s “rigorous empiricism” can comprehend and master the challenges of unfamiliarity posed by foreign landscapes and their subjects (Grove 34).

In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the axis of literary interest in foreign landscapes began to shift away from the Americas toward the East, following colonial expansion, while social symbolic meanings became increasingly displaced from their original religious contexts (Grove 50). Biblical and classical language remained entrenched in paradise discourse, but transformed from theological signs into metaphorical shorthand for the global variety and riches unlocked by colonial expansion: paradise did not disappear, just became secularized. The hope of *discovering* fabled utopias was replaced with the intention of *building* new utopian settlements and plantations under their name, whether in North America, or from the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards, in Africa.<sup>22</sup> The rise of Linnaean classification dictated a further secularization of paradise discourse within the framework of natural history, as “Edenic edifices” were forged in the writing of naturalists who moved through the world like “Adam in the primordial garden,” naming and “innocently” collecting specimens (Pratt 56-7). The “planetary

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<sup>22</sup> A classic example of the shift from the discovery to the plantation of paradise is the case of early 17<sup>th</sup>-century paradise seeker, Samuel Hartlib, who tried to find an economic backer for a utopian settlement in the New World which he named Antilia after the older utopian fantasy which had appeared on maps throughout the 15<sup>th</sup> century and which Columbus thought he had sighted on his first voyage to the West Indies. As Rushby remarks, “By Hartlib’s day, any possibility that Antilia might be discovered was gone, but the hope of establishing a plantation under that name endured. Paradise was no longer to be stumbled upon, but built” (114). The 18<sup>th</sup> century saw the first utopian settlements in Africa, beginning with the 1791 colonization of Bulama, an island off the coast of West Africa, where the Bulama Association formed a utopian settlement based on Thomas Spence’s fictionalized island utopia in *Crusonia, or Robinson Crusoe’s Island* (1782) (Coleman “Bulama” 65).



consciousness” produced by this systemizing of nature (Pratt 290) only increased the mobility of paradise discourse in application to different regions and continents.

As European colonial expansion accelerated, the homogenizing transformations of people, economy and nature which it catalyzed also gave rise to a myth of lost paradise, which served as a register of nostalgia for obliterated cultures, peoples, and environments, and as a measure of the rapid ecological changes, frequently deforestation and dessication, generated by colonizing capital. On one hand, this myth served to suppress dissent by submerging it in melancholy, but on the other, it promoted the emergence of an imperialist environmental critique which would motivate the later establishment of colonial botanical gardens, potential Edens in which nature could be re-made.<sup>23</sup> However, the subversive potential of the “green” critique voiced through the myth of endangered paradise was defused by the extent to which growing environmental sensibilities enabled imperialism to function more efficiently by appropriating botanical knowledge and indigenous conservation methods, thus continuing to serve the purposes of European capital.

## **The Enlightenment and Beyond: Rise of the Consumer Paradise**

“In place of the old wants, satisfied by the production of the country, we find new wants, requiring for their satisfaction the products of distant lands and climes.”

– Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (1848)

The rise of the Enlightenment did not produce the death of paradise; rather, “like a ghost in the new machines of science and progress, the myth of paradise lived on” (Rushby 136). As plantation money from the sales of sugar and molasses flowed from the Caribbean islands back across the Atlantic, financing the building of stately homes with ostentatious gardens and giving rise to a culture of staggering wealth and

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<sup>23</sup> The allegorical significance of Eden grew rather than dwindled in response to the colonial environmentalists growing fear that “the whole earth might be threatened by deforestation, famine, extinctions and climactic change. Re-created or not, the human race appeared to face expulsion from the garden altogether!” (Grove 15).

extravagant spending, paradise became increasingly defined in the secular terms of exclusivity and luxury, a consumer Eden which could be accessed not through religious piety, but through the accumulation of money and status. The pursuit of mystical bliss was replaced by the craving for physical pleasures, the addictive stimulations of tea, coffee, and sugar. Edenic delight was no longer reserved for the afterlife, nor confined to the colonies, but could be readily enjoyed at home. Free trade created desires for luxuries that soon became needs as sugar, spices, tobacco, coffee, and foreign fruits went wholesale on the market, available not only to the aristocracy, but to the rising middle classes. Facilitated by scientific innovation, the myth of paradise as endless supply and plenty propelled further exploitation and spending so that it came to resemble “a voracious capitalist monster” devouring the earth’s resources at an ever-accelerating rate (Rushby 148).

Paradise’s transformation from a *place* to a *state* of consumption was in process during the period when the last “Edenic” territories were being “discovered.” As colonial expansion led to European encounters with large “wild” landscapes seemingly untouched by man, imaginative projections of paradise expanded beyond the limitations of gardens and tropical islands, encompassing mainland continents such as India and Africa in the attempt to produce and contain symbolic knowledge of these landscapes and their people. However, the very excess and speed of this expansion predicted its demise. As these landscapes were colonized, scientifically categorized, and mined for their resources, Europeans were stricken by a fear of having exhausted nature, and turned eastwards in search of new paradisaical locations, beginning with Ceylon and extending to the Oceanic and Polynesian islands.<sup>24</sup> The scientific journeys of Anson, Bougainville and Cook generated the first “paradise tourism,” reinforcing the utopian significance of the Pacific islands as the last “unspoiled” locations on earth. Bougainville’s propagation of Tahiti as a new Isle of

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<sup>24</sup> In texts about the South Pacific, in contrast to earlier texts about the Americas, European anxieties about the impact of colonialism are expressed through the portrayal of “the corruption of paradisiacal spaces by intruders...[thus] establish[ing] paradise as a site of confrontation between an invading, corrupting knowledge and the inhabitants’ innocent ignorance” (Daemmrich 154). Yet while the myth of corrupted paradise is critical of colonialism, it continues to reinforce the notion of non-Western inhabitants as noble savages, and prepares the way for representation of the South Pacific as paradises of primitivism or sexual freedom which would attract artists such as Paul Gauguin in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.



the Blest reflected the sexual revolution which increasingly disassociated sexuality from sin, by re-imagining the topos in terms of erotic gratification. The imagination of Pacific islands as feminized paradises of sex unfolding themselves to the male European gaze also announced a shift in representations of the Orient. As the military and economic threat of Islamic power gradually waned, the West was increasingly free to imagine a sensual, exotic Orient of harems and seraglios, distorting Koranic descriptions of paradise into a prurient fantasy of male sexual debauch, serviced by female *houris*.<sup>25</sup> Upon publication, Claude Prosper Jolyot de Cr  billon's *Le sopha* (1740), and Antoine Galland's *Les mille et une nuits* (1704; 1711) became staples of personal libraries, transforming fantasies of the Orient into literary commodities for consumption alongside other luxuries.<sup>26</sup>

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, paradise discourse not only accommodated ever-increasing trade and expansion but also became increasingly implicated in Enlightenment myths. The French Revolution was cast in eschatological terms: through violence, the old, corrupt order would be purged and the new age of reason would be birthed, bringing a secular heaven on earth.<sup>27</sup> The millenarian notions of previous centuries gave way to a modern conception of progress as an inexorable force which would lead to perfection (Rushby 141). The relation between paradise and the myth of progress is famously encapsulated in Walter Benjamin's parable of the "Angel of History":

The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the

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<sup>25</sup> From Said's *Orientalism* onwards, critics have demonstrated how the West distorted Koranic images of paradise to support the idea of a voluptuous East, imagining "that Muslims were not only lewd in every day life, but had conceived of a heaven that would permit endless sensual gratification, ignoring the fact that the Christian Paradise itself promised rivers, gardens, milk and honey" (Kabbani 17). However, this does not mean that Islamic texts do not have their own paradise discourse which frequently fetishizes or sensualizes women's bodies while excluding their voices, as Fedwa Malti-Douglas demonstrates in *Woman's Body, Woman's Word* (1991).

<sup>26</sup> Galland's translations were based on 14<sup>th</sup>-century Syrian manuscripts of the Sinbad and Arabian Nights stories, which had existed in oral form in Islamic literature for many centuries previous.

<sup>27</sup> See Adam Zamoyski's *Holy Madness* (2000) for a discussion of 18<sup>th</sup>-century notions of apocalypse and paradise in connection to the French, American and Haitian revolutions.



pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.  
(249)

Benjamin demystifies the idea of history as a “chain of events” leading to perfection, presenting instead a vision of ever-mounting destruction. The storm from paradise which prevents the angel from going back suggests that myths of paradise are a hindrance to reparation and partly responsible for the nightmares of history. Paradise is lost, “but not lost enough” (Wood 260), since it is the notion of loss which sustains the myth of progress, the illusion that capitalist modernity will produce the recovery of some lost, perfect order, and thus prevents other ways of changing the world.<sup>28</sup>

Despite Henri Michaux’s claim for the peculiar modernity of the 20<sup>th</sup> century—“Nous ne sommes pas un siècle à paradis” (“Connaissance” 9)—with the progressive industrialization of the 19<sup>th</sup>-21<sup>st</sup> centuries and the advance of global capitalism, the paradise myth has grown even more urgent as a register of intensifying alienation and environmental destruction which cultivates melancholy but diverts dissent by offering up the fantasies of progress and consumer Eden as consolation and distraction:

Paradise has become the unacknowledged faith of our times, the driving myth of progress and consumer capitalism. We see aspects of the old perfection myth born again everywhere, in Arcadian dreams of country living, in environmentalist hopes for a return to a Golden Age of global harmony, and even in the supermarket’s ambition to make a Perpetual Spring. (Rushby xiv)

The transitory “plastic paradise” offered by commercial advertising disappears on consumption only to be replaced by a new product, so that “the enjoyment of paradise becomes a repetitive process of desire, purchase, consumption, followed by renewed desire, purchase, and consumption” (Daemmrich 202). The artificial paradise of the Renaissance could be reworked for our time, not as an image of delight manipulated according to the pilgrim’s desires, but rather as a revelation of the control of modern consumers. The shopping mall is the new labyrinth of desire, the “sacred” temple of

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<sup>28</sup> Benjamin urges us to criticize all notions of progress, but to imagine alternative ways of changing the world: “by irregular invasions or interventions...like the coming of the Messiah; analogues of redemption” (Wood 259). Similarly, as I will discuss in my conclusion, Ernst Bloch’s *The Principle of Hope* attempts to recover analogues of redemption which could recuperate the utopian possibilities of paradise myth without falling back on its pathological misuses.

the “religion of the marketplace,” which deliberately disorients and reorients consumer-pilgrims within its maze to induce them to buy (Pahl 71). Daemmrich bemoans how the word *paradise* has become an advertising device, “reduced to a clichéd condition or place envisioned as the antithesis to monotonous reality” (202), which duly recognizes the Marxian truth that if the workplace is hell, then leisure and recreation must promise paradise. However, paradise’s role in contemporary advertising is not some corrupted version of a formerly pristine idea. Rather, it has always been linked to economy, fuelled by the material exploitation of resources, and thus has always been already degraded.

The claim for the “peculiar modernity” demonstrated by the replacement of faith with consumer desire responds to the violence of late capitalist modernity but fails to recognize that modernity itself emerged centuries before. Nor is the “remarkable agility” of paradise to “move from canonized literature into the extremely diverse contexts of commercial texts,” to “accommodate contradictions and multiplications” by “adapting its etymological roots, ‘to form around,’ to ever new and playful contexts” (Daemmrich 203) so extraordinary if it is seen as a product of the dominant culture stabilizing capitalist modernity, which has been constantly adapting itself for centuries.<sup>29</sup> Kevin Rushby cites the case of North American Joseph Knowles, who staged a 1913 protest against consumer materialism, retreating from civilization to live naked as Adam in a cabin in the forest in Maine and subsequently became a newspaper celebrity, his every move tracked for public consumption, as an example of how the “vast industrial machine that brought entertainment and distraction to American homes...discovered that anything could be sold, even an apparent rejection of its own values” (219).

The consumer Eden of immediate gratification and overabundance is environmentally non-sustainable within a global mass market economy and unethical, since it is

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<sup>29</sup> Here I invoke Raymond Williams’ distinction between *residual*, *emergent* and *dominant* culture and the ways in which dominant culture appropriates and assimilates those emergent or residual cultures which would otherwise pose a threat to itself (“Base” 10-1). This explains how the variants of the paradise myth which are more overtly utopian or resistant to dominant and imperialist culture could nonetheless be absorbed into the mainstream idea.



available only to “developed” nations. Even if development could be equalized, extending Western patterns of consumption and waste to the rest of the world would result in the destruction of the planet. However, the myth of paradise can accommodate even the West’s bad conscience about those who are excluded, since it includes a built-in dimension of guilt, detached from its original theological context (and therefore from the possibility of redemption): “Only the presence/absence of paradise, a paradise already betrayed but not yet abandoned, could guarantee a consciousness of sin. ...Paradise and its loss are metaphors for what feels like perpetual failure (or perpetual guilt)” (Wood 257-8). For Wood, this guilt prevents real change by harking on notions of perfection. In the context of the global market, the sense of failure is just what is needed to convert possible dissent into despair which can only be assuaged through the pursuit of more paradise.

D.H. Lawrence advocates primitivism in *Apocalypse and the Writings of Revelation* (1931) as an antidote to the spiritual bankruptcy and commercialization of European civilization, but as Joseph Knowles’ story demonstrates, even the urge to retreat from materialistic, consumer society into nature can become a marketable commodity: the primitive exotic. Increasingly, not only the enjoyment of paradisaal delights but paradise itself has become a product, an item for “global export” on the tourist market, whether the “American Edens” of national parks (whose illusions of pristine wilderness could only be achieved through the eviction of indigenous Indians), the beach paradises of Barbados and Antigua and Mexico, or the reefs and fair coasts of Sri Lanka and Zanzibar. In our global, ever-shrinking world, the disappearance of “wilderness” and “discoverable” territories has led to the description of the few remaining remote landscapes as ecological Edens, even those as seemingly unparadisaal as the Arctic and Antarctica,<sup>30</sup> and as Chris Bongie suggests, to the rise of

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<sup>30</sup> The aesthetic of Arctic romanticism represents polar landscapes in paradisaal tropes, as in Isobel Wylie Hutchison’s description of Greenland: “We are setting sail...for Fairyland, the Green Isle on which the ever-venturous spirit of the Gael has set his ever-receding paradise, the land wreathed in mists beyond which the sun is always shining...a land of laughter and light and flowers which is reached in a crystal land into which nothing evil may enter unseen” (cited in Moss 193-4). Polar explorers fetishize the Arctic and Antarctic as “pre-industrial, rural world[s]” unspoiled by modernity (Moss 232); however, these regions are just as easily characterized as frozen hells, white wastelands when expeditions go wrong.



an artificial paradise of the exotic in compensation for the loss of a horizon or an *elsewhere* to conquer.<sup>31</sup> Graham Huggan connects Bongie's concept of fin-de-siècle exoticism to an age-of-globalization "postcolonial exotic," where contemporary tourism is characterized by "inauthentic" nostalgia and a manufacturing of 'paradises' to fulfil the "impossible search for 'uncontaminated' experience" (180).

Since the 1960s and 1970s, "exoticist visions of plenitude and paradise" have been "appropriated and commodified on an unprecedented scale" by the tourist industry" (Pratt 221). Despite the initial backlash against tourist propaganda by writers such as Paul Theroux who offered "realist," degraded, counter-commodified versions of postcolonial reality (Pratt 221), neocolonial travel writers perpetrate national and global constructions of third-world destinations as pristine, endangered, or "last remaining" paradises. At the new turn-of-the-century, the "inter-related ideologies of colonialism, orientalism and tourism" rely on the marketing and sale of essentialist cultures and exotic settings (Huggan 199), as in the Caribbean, where the transition of the economy from *encomienda*, slavery, and indenture to tourism has "resurrected" the tropes of paradise discourse:

No longer is the imagined Caribbean paradise a site where wealth can be attained in the money form (gold) or acquired via the export of commodities (sugar, tobacco, and cotton). The site is now a sight. Now the Caribbean paradise is wealth; it is the commodity for sale; and it is profit. The paradise is now both myth and material good. (Strachan 112)

Fashioning metropolitan escapist fantasies, governments encourage locals to labour exhaustively to provide a lifestyle of "work-free" leisure and luxury for tourists that is in direct contradiction to the poverty of their own lives. The irony of the paradise myth's ability to transform itself is apparent in the fact that Jamaica could be described as wasteland in 1849 because of the alleged laziness of its black inhabitants, but 100 years later, tourism marketers call it a Garden of Eden exactly

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<sup>31</sup> "'We' are all here, part of a homogenized world community organized according to the dictates of (post)industrial, transnational power; 'ours' is a world without horizons... with the disappearance of an 'elsewhere' and of those who might formerly have inhabited this alternative space, something essential has been lost' hence the need for the exotic in our 'modern, all too modern times'" (Bongie 3).

because of this, selling an easy life of recreation to tourists, while glossing over its social realities (Strachan 4).

The plantation hotel of the Caribbean travel industry is in Antonio Benitez-Rojo's terminology a "repeating machine," an extension of the plantation economy which continues to exploit the periphery for the pleasure of the core, only this time the coveted resources are not gold, silver, pearls, tobacco, cotton, or sugar, but rather, sun, sand and sea. Plantation colonies were characterized by a racially-mixed, rigidly-hierarchical society, dependence on the mother country, and monopoly of the best land. The plantation system was created by and for foreign capital, producing and exporting crops on the foreign market. Its legacies are unemployment, low national income, unequal distribution of wealth, extreme under-consumption and underutilization of land, and continued dependence on the markets of the core (Beckford 177). Far from liberating countries from these legacies of underdevelopment, paradise tourism reinforces economic dependence, encourages the persistence of a culture of white (or Western) mastery opposed to black (or indigenous) servility, and commodifies sites of indigenous cultural resistance as exotic entertainment. Hotels exist side by side with plantations not only in the Caribbean, but also, as I will demonstrate, in the cinnamon and tea plantations of Sri Lanka, the clove and spice plantations of Zanzibar, or in Mexico, where the failure of agrarian reform and the rise of bourgeois landowners sustained by foreign capital means the structural inequalities produced by the hacienda system live on. However, the discrepancy between the images of paradise set up by tourist discourse and the economic and social realities of life in postcolonial countries does not go unremarked, as I will show in the following section.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> I use the term postcolonial guardedly, to designate fiction written in the historical period after decolonization and to indicate the critical strategies of the discipline known as "postcolonial studies." However, I am fully aware that the "post" in postcolonial is premature, implying an end to imperialism which my focus in this thesis on the deleterious cultural and economic effects of ongoing indirect colonialism and informal imperialism certainly does not support.



## Eden Ironic, Eden Reformed: Paradise and the Postcolonial

Ben Okri's novel *In Arcadia* (2002), although thinly characterized and prone to cod philosophy, raises crucial questions about the continued resonance of the paradise myth in the age of late capitalism. Adapting the structure of John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, Okri relocates the quest for paradise from Africa to Europe. Instead of seeking primitive gold-lands, Okri's protagonists travel from the post-imperial "City of Destruction" London to the "Celestial City" of Paris. The multicultural film crew attempt to make a film about the French origins of paradise, only to conclude that Arcadia is nothing more than "an inscription which no one could decode" (193). London and Paris are bleak, cosmopolitan wastelands, unreal cities in a globally-united but individually-fragmented world, where the protagonists cannot find the object of their desire, since there is no literal place of origin, but rather a myriad of "hidden landscapes," "Exilus...Eden...Babylon...Utopia...Versailles... Atlantis... Arcadia" (18), projected onto "all the lands of the earth" (193). Yet Okri's narrator, Lao, cannot dismiss his longing to escape the crisis of (post)modernity: "Folks are going out of their minds, falling apart, hanging out in the fag end of the long centuries. We've lost all our beliefs, our innocence" (8). Lao's millennial anxiety gestures towards why Okri and the writers I review below cannot abandon the paradise motif, despite its seeming irrelevance in a post-Enlightenment, secular age.

Paradise is a myth which seems dead but is nevertheless ubiquitous, serving as an exilic marker of loss and decline and as a trace of utopian longing. It has a history of misuse as a "wrong dream" projected upon the world, "a nightmare of reality" justifying the spread of "invisible imperialisms" (Okri 222), yet its transnational ability to be projected onto all the lands of the earth is precisely what make it so easily transformed into a vehicle for critique, like utopia, which criticizes that which is, by portraying that which is not. In his article on the ubiquity of paradise in contemporary European culture, Wood notes the mounting number of literary novels published in the last several decades which are entitled *Paradise*, singling out Abel Posse's *Los perros del paraíso* (1987), Hervé Guibert's *Le paradis* (1992),



Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Paradise* (1994), and Toni Morrison's *Paradise* (1998), as evidence that most of these novels exhibit an ironic notion of paradise (246). Although Wood suggests that this irony constitutes a kind of death, I would argue that these novelists reconfigure the myth into a vehicle for dissent.

Argentine Abel Posse's brilliant, undeservedly neglected novel explores Christopher Columbus's delusions and excavates the origins of paradise myth in the interests of mounting a scathing, yet frequently hilarious critique of the abuses of imperialism, fascism and (neo)imperialism not only in Latin America and the Caribbean, but in Europe. Using neo-baroque, experimental literary strategies similar to Carlos Fuentes' in *Terra Nostra*, Posse constructs a "total view of world history" radiating out from the Columbian moment, which aligns the atrocities of 15<sup>th</sup>-century Spanish empire and conquest with 20<sup>th</sup>-century Nazism and genocide, American economic and cultural imperialism, and Argentine fascism under Juan Perón's military dictatorship (Menton 938). Gurnah's *Paradise*, to which I will devote my fourth chapter, makes vibrant use of a pastiche of African oral narrative and Islamic literary tropes to reclaim the complex cultural and literary traditions of Swahili East Africa, while subverting the imaginary East Africa as metaphysical terrain and rejecting the legend of its unsullied, homogenous pre-colonial past.

Morrison's *Paradise* is a fictional reconstruction of the forgotten black mid-western communities of the post-bellum period, focusing on the all-black town of Ruby, Oklahoma which has invented a utopian image of itself as an earthly paradise, an African-Americanized version of the founding Puritan fable of "The City on a Hill." Showing how Ruby's revolutionary, utopian possibilities are undermined by the rhetoric of racial purity and the exercise of patriarchal authority to control its fictions of pristine origin, Morrison interrogates the concepts of "promised land" and "paradise" at the heart of American discourses of national and individual identity-building, and exposes the essentialism, Manichaeism, and exclusion which they can engender (Fraile-Marcos 1).

Hervé Guibert's novel is a more problematic figuring of spiritual and bodily disintegration under the ravages of the AIDS virus through the form of a delirious travelogue *manqué*, in which the modern, terminally-ill protagonist reenacts Rimbaud's journey to "black" Africa, visiting Mali, Martinique and Bora-Bora in his obsession to taste the "absolute dream, the peak experience...paradise itself" before his death (Guibert 36). While the novel satirizes the genre of contemporary travel writing produced for Western tourists who desire to "gulp down... whole so-called paradise[s], like an enormous hamburger slathered in ketchup" (25), it does so by portraying developing-world tourist destinations as insidiously dangerous and disease-ridden beneath their guidebook facades.<sup>33</sup> Murray Pratt argues that the author articulates his identity as an HIV-positive writer by staging a radical collapse of "the fundamentals of Western logic (absence/presence, body/mind, real/unreal)" in response to imagined non-Western geographies (1). However, this results in the representation of the landscapes and subjects of the Francophone South Pacific, Africa, and Caribbean as hallucinatory figures of the protagonist's disease, disorientation, and dissolution, constructing non-Western landscapes through an exotic of disintegration, and thus illustrating a pitfall of the ironic notion of paradise.

Novels and poetry which invert, ironize, revitalize, or reconfigure the paradise myth in the context of the inequalities and injustices of nationalism, capitalism, globalization, and (neo)imperialism have come to constitute a sub-genre of contemporary literature, as I will demonstrate now through a brief review of the stream of paradise, Eden, Arcadia, and heaven-themed novels published during the last decades. Breyten Breytenbach's *A Season in Paradise* (1980) adopts an exilic motif of paradise to express his critique of apartheid-era South Africa and his

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<sup>33</sup> Travel writing after the 1970s shifts towards a discourse of negation which reflects the West's strained relation to the places which it continues to hold in subjugation. A major, obsessive trope of this negating discourse is that of "paradise lost," in which travel-writers journey to a former paradise to discover that it has become despoiled, disease-ridden or dangerous: see, for example, Yvonne Ridley's sensationalized account in *Ticket to Paradise* (2003) of a female journalist in thrall to fundamentalist Islam, Dea Birkett's *Serpent in Paradise* (1997) or Nick Middleton and Trevor Lummis' *Life and Death in Eden: Pitcairn Island and the "Bounty Mutineers"* (2000).



frustrated longing to return to his homeland.<sup>34</sup> Hugh Fleetwood's *Paradise* (1986), a rather clumsy morality tale, condemns the behaviour of wealthy English expatriates pursuing decadent abandon in rural Italy. Elena Castedo's *Paradise* (1990) deplores the injustices perpetuated by the remnants of the feudal class system in South America by focusing on the dissipation of a group of wealthy landowners and Spanish expatriates disporting themselves in a hacienda-paradise. David Lodge's light comedy *Paradise News* (1991) offers a sharp satire of paradise tourism, in which his blundering protagonist discovers that "the history of Hawaii is the history of loss...Paradise stolen. Paradise raped. Paradise infected. Paradise owned, developed, packaged. Paradise sold" (177).<sup>35</sup> Duong Thu Huong's *The Paradise of the Blind* (1994) criticizes the degeneration of Soviet-style Communism into state capitalism, and by portraying the lives of indentured Vietnamese labourers in the Soviet Union, shows how Soviet influence on northern Vietnam constituted a kind of economic, cultural imperialism.

Sharon Butala's melodramatic but pointedly eco-critical *A Garden of Eden* (1998) explores the impact of globalization on communal agriculture and land, juxtaposing the destruction of the Saskatchewan prairie by mass factory-farms with the negative effects of aid-dependency in famine-stricken Ethiopia. Margaret Cezair-Thompson's *The True History of Paradise* (1999) investigates the legacies of colonialism and the continued representation of Jamaican national history as either blissful or apocalyptic. Matthew Theale's *English Passengers* (2000) follows a British Victorian missionary's deluded search for Eden in Tasmania, and his subsequent destruction of the aboriginal population. Jem Poster's *Rifling Paradise* (2006) also explores the

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<sup>34</sup> See Neil Lazarus' "Longing, Radicalism, Sentimentality" (1986) for a reading of the novel's contradictory registers: "The more the vivid, immediate recollection of South Africa fades from his memory, the more desperate becomes his longing for it... Its characteristic registers are utopian, abstract, and implicitly tragic, because Breytenbach can foresee no practical means of grasping the object of his longing" (163).

<sup>35</sup> Lodge punctures the myth of Hawaii as island paradise and shows the ravages of its colonial past and its neocolonial present as a reluctant state of the US, overwhelmed by North American and Japanese tourists; however, the novel is light reading and rather too swift to offer narrative resolution. The protagonist Bernard, a theologian who has lost his faith in theology, initially finds Waikiki "purgatory" when he visits the island to care for his dying sister, but by the conclusion, he has found love in Hawaii—a restoration of faith, a redemption, which casts the island as a paradise regained.



impact of Enlightenment values in the South Pacific, following a British naturalist into the New South Wales bush, and revealing the annihilative desire for mastery that underlies his allegedly scientific, “rational” relation to the natural environment and its human indigenes. Romesh Gunesequera’s *Heaven’s Edge* (2002), which I examine in my final chapter, comes to terms with the deleterious effects of contemporary tourism, globalization, and competing nationalisms on the environment, culture and economy of Sri Lanka, while Moroccan writer Mahi Binibene’s *Welcome to Paradise* (2003)<sup>36</sup> offers a concise, painful critique of the media fantasies of the West as a consumer’s cornucopia which lead to the draining of North African countries as asylum-seekers risk their lives to cross the Strait of Gibraltar.

Adapting the question of why “the representation of the Caribbean as a paradise has persisted in spite of social, cultural, political and economic phenomena that clearly embody anything but earthly bliss” (Strachan 3), we might ask why paradise motifs persist across so many literatures. Perhaps the answer lies not only in the discourses of tourism and the postcolonial exotic which have re-energized the fantasy, but also in the tendency of contemporary postcolonial writers to transform anti-paradise from its original function as an expression of imperial guilt and anxiety into an overt revelation and critique of repressed realities. Hence, in postcolonial writing, the underworld and the inferno are no longer the secret shadows of the earthly paradise and the city on the hill, but their obvious products. David Pike describes the “compelling double valence” of underworld topoi as “encompassing within the inflections of [their] metamorphosis both the master narratives and their countercurrents, both the will to transcend and the movement toward entropy” (xii). The image of a fallen world need not be paralyzing, so long as it does not support the unrealizable fantasy of returning to or re-creating a state of pure origins, but instead provokes recognition of present suffering:

Marx perhaps best explained the power of the image of the underworld to an inhabitant of modern Western society: if we are already in hell, then it is in

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<sup>36</sup> The original French title is *Cannibales*. The novel was renamed because the publishers did not expect Anglophone readers to decipher the allusion to Montaigne’s cannibals, reversed here to refer to a “savage” Western European society which devours the developing world.

this world as well that we must seek the way back out. Hence every descent in modern literature has at least an inkling of return, every timeless myth a counter image of the history behind it. Many, as Benjamin suggested, need only be disenchanted, the ideology behind the myth revealed. (Pike 246)

Although paradise discourse has been repeatedly mobilized in the service of capitalist modes of production and accumulation of wealth, the longing for a better way of being which underlies the myth may itself be positive, reflecting what Marx calls the “heart of a heartless world, the soul of soulless conditions.” Myths of paradise and inferno, utopia and dystopia not only construct “intractable divisions within their culture” (Carey xii) but also reveal them.

Paradise, like Fredric Jameson’s conception of utopia,<sup>37</sup> functions both as fantasy and systemic critique, but it cannot function as a blueprint for reality, as Mario Vargas Llosa demonstrates in his novel *The Way to Paradise* (2003), in which Paul Gauguin’s search for the primitive exotic in the South Pacific is juxtaposed with his radical socialist grandmother Flora Tristan’s struggle to create a feminist, utopian worker’s paradise. For Llosa, both Gauguin’s quest for “a primitive, intense civilization, uncorrupted by the abuse of reason or ecclesiastical regulations,”<sup>38</sup> and Tristan’s utopian project are fated not to succeed because “Paradise is not of this world and those who dedicate their endeavors to searching for it or manufacturing it here are irremediably doomed to failure” (“Huellas” 3).<sup>39</sup> Yet he applauds Gauguin’s flawed vision: “Koke, the poor dreamer, was not wholly mistaken when he came here in pursuit of his unattainable dream” (“Huellas” 3).<sup>40</sup> The different mode of existence which Gauguin recognizes in the South Pacific, however endangered, stands in opposition to European capitalist modernity, representing a world “where one may

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<sup>37</sup> In “Politics of Utopia,” Jameson argues that we must revive the “dying utopian idea” in this age of historical disassociation, globalization, and social disintegration, not because it provides us with a political blueprint, but because utopias enable the play of fantasy and the possibility of imagining the “systemic otherness of an alternate society” (2).

<sup>38</sup> The translation and those following are mine. The original reads: “de civilizaciones primitivas e intensas, aún no corrompidas por el abuso de la razón y los reglamentarismos eclesiásticos...”

<sup>39</sup> “El paraíso no es de este mundo y quienes dedican sus empeños a buscarlo o fabricarlo aquí están irremediabilmente condenados a fracasar.”

<sup>40</sup> “Koke, el pobre soñador, no estaba del todo descaminado cuando vino hasta aquí en pos de su sueño inalcanzable.”



live in peace, given to one's own vocation and not to the tasks which separate one from it, without the permanent fear, the ferocious fight for food, for money and for success" ("Huellas" 2).<sup>41</sup>

Writers less pessimistic than Vargas Llosa have pushed the redemptive possibilities of the paradise myth further, particularly in the Caribbean, where the cultural cross-fertilization resulting from colonialism and slavery has yielded not only the traumas of amnesia and deracination, but the fruit of syncretism, theorized in various forms as hybridity, transculturation, mestizaje, creolization, créolité, or Antillanité.<sup>42</sup> Derek Walcott is one poet whose mythopoetics invent the Caribbean as Edenic precisely because it is a protean, hybrid "new world" teeming with imaginative possibilities. Walcott inverts discriminatory colonial tropes to open new spaces of cultural agency and free Caribbean subjects from past violation, so that infernal bush becomes "O happy desert," and the peasant fisherman is no longer savage, but "modern Adam" in a "virginal, unpainted world," a formal strategy which Strachan calls the "(r)evolution of the lie into a truth of unexpected capability" (201). However, Walcott is open to criticism for too readily adopting patriarchal, imperialist metaphors without addressing the material structures they support, and because his reversals cannot be extended into the economic, historical realm as revolutions beyond the level of language.<sup>43</sup> The hazards of using tropes of paradise to encapsulate the possibilities of métissage lie not only in their colonial provenance, but with the theorists whose

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<sup>41</sup> "Donde se pudiera vivir en paz y no el sobresalto permanente, sin la lucha feroz por el alimento, por el dinero y por el éxito, entregado a su propia vocación y no a quehaceres que lo apartaran de ella."

<sup>42</sup> See Wilson Harris' *Womb of Space* (1983); Edward Kamau Brathwaite's *Development of Creole Society in Jamaica* (1971); Fernando Ortiz' *Cuban Counterpoint* (1995), Antonio Benítez-Rojo's *Repeating Island* (1992); Gloria E. Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1999); Edouard Glissant's *Caribbean Discourse* (1989); Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphaël Confiant's "In Praise of Creoleness" (1990); Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant's *Lettres Créoles* (1991). Cultural cross-fertilization has also occurred across the Indian Ocean as a result of Islamic and Portuguese mercantilism and empire, producing hybrid cultures in the Swahili coasts of East Africa, the French Oceanic islands, the Burgher communities of Sri Lanka, and the Sidi population of southern India. Building on Martinician models, several critics are currently working on theoretical formulations of Indian Ocean créolité, particularly in Mauritius and Réunion: see Françoise Vergès' *Monsters and Revolutionaries* (1999); Françoise Lionnet's "Créolité in the Indian Ocean" (1993); and Laurent Médéa, Lucette Labache and Françoise Vergès' *Identité et Société Réunionnaise* (2005).

<sup>43</sup> Walcott's gendering of his Caribbean Eden is particularly problematic, assigning the Adamic role of naming to men, but generally excluding women as agents and treating them as idealized symbols of the land, subjected to and determined by the male gaze, as in the case of *Omeros*' Helen.



celebratory focus on the resistant or redemptive “newness” of these mixed cultural and linguistic traditions frequently excludes from analysis the “combined and uneven development” of material conditions in the peripheries and semi-peripheries of capitalism which generate not “alternative” but “coeval” modernities.<sup>44</sup> A further snare can be observed in the fiction of Paule Marshall, Michelle Cliff, Margaret Cezair-Thompson, and Jamaica Kincaid, for while these women have been among the most vehement and eloquent in their critique of the economies of plantation and tourism, most trenchantly in Kincaid’s *A Small Place*, nonetheless, their work “echoes paradise discourse...in discussions of the Caribbean as a place outside time and beyond the real world” (Strachan 224).<sup>45</sup> Contemporary Australian and South Pacific writers such as Inez Baranay and Gerard Lee face a similar struggle to represent the islands without reproducing the postlapsarian myth which Baranay calls “yobbos wreck island paradise” (cited in Huggan 198).

The risks of reconfiguring the paradise myth in the service of postcolonial mythopoesis are enhanced by the degree to which paradise discourse has been insidiously absorbed into dominant national culture in cooperation with the global economies of tourism, a phenomenon Colleen Ballerino Cohen has dubbed “marketing paradise, making nation.” Cohen uses the case of the British Virgin Islands to demonstrate how island nations market feminized paradisiacal landscapes to Western tourists, while encouraging their own citizens to identify with these as patriotic expressions (204-21). For postcolonial writers, the problem is how to escape, subvert, or re-imagine paradise discourse which imposes itself on the national identity as a relentless economic, social, and media presence. Indeed, their very works may be

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<sup>44</sup> I am indebted for this point to Benita Parry’s synthesis of Jameson, Harootunian, and Trotsky’s theory of combined and uneven development: “Those interested in examining the generic modes and stylistic mannerisms of modern Third World literatures—that is since the mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century—cannot fail to root their enquiries in the distinctive experiences of *modernity* in spaces beyond Europe and North America, where the intrusions of colonial capitalism produced juxtapositions of incommensurable material, cultural, social, and existential conditions. [...] This means conceiving of modernity as a totality that encompasses a host of peripheral manifestations coeval with, but different from the forms assumed in the capitalist centres” (“Third” 5).

<sup>45</sup> Cliff’s “wild, natural, cultural” Jamaica which resists colonization relies to some extent on Edenic tropes, Marshall perhaps over-mythologizes maroon resistance to plantation, and while Kincaid is least inclined to romanticize landscape, she still employs ambivalent figures of mother(is)land-as-paradise, particularly in *Annie John* and *Lucy*.

appropriated to market the nation to a Western audience, and I will be attentive to this possibility throughout my analysis, questioning whether Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Paradise*, published just as Zanzibar was making the transition to a tourist economy, plays a role in exoticizing the island through its recuperation of Swahili identity, or whether it thoroughly resists commodification. In my analysis of Romesh Gunsekera's *Reef*, *The Sandglass* and *Heaven's Edge*, I will similarly explore how successful Gunsekera is in his critique of the dynamics of paradise discourse in tourism and globalization as they are played out in contemporary Sri Lanka, and in my second chapter, I will show how Malcolm Lowry's portrayal of Mexico as an "infernal paradise," intended to mount a materialist critique, has been assimilated into dominant national culture and used to market "magical, tragic" Mexico to North American tourists.

Throughout this introduction, I have endeavoured to trace in the most general terms the major evolutions of the paradise myth in the European imagination, with particular emphasis on the discursive shifts produced in response to changes in its underlying economies, in order to set the context for more specific readings of paradise discourse in the regions of Mexico, East Africa and Sri Lanka. My chapters will construct a loose chronology of paradise in relation to European imperialism, starting in the New World, moving to Africa, and concluding with the late colonization of Ceylon. Because the large sub-genre of contemporary postcolonial literature revolving around myths of paradise ranges across multiple languages and countries, I can only address a small selection. My choice to concentrate on Anglophone writers is motivated not by aesthetic prejudices but by the continued dominance of writing in English within the global market. Despite this concentration, the overall thrust of my argument is comparative, and I should emphasize once again that paradise myth does not originate uniquely within European discourse, nor operate strictly within the confines of British imperialism, but is informed by transnational interactions with other empires and world-systems, including those of India, China, Africa and the Middle East, and is therefore multi-synchronous, with tropes appearing at different times in different regions. Furthermore, whereas in Mexico the Spanish

remained in control of the colony until independence, Tanganyika and Ceylon suffered waves of mercantilism and imperialism, and Britain did not acquire dominion over these territories until late in the history of British imperialism; therefore, my readings of literature in Ceylon must be attentive to the cultural legacies of Arab mercantilism, Portuguese, and Dutch colonization, whilst my readings of literature from Zanzibar and Tanganyika must take into account the history of Portuguese colonization, Arab mercantilism, Omani expansionism, and the brief but violent period of German colonialism.

As previously mentioned, I have selected these three regions because they have been marginalized in critical discourse, despite the preponderance of paradisaical topoi attached to them and their frequent strategic and economic significance throughout the history of empire. Rather than address tropes of paradise in the Caribbean islands as has been so frequently done, I focus on Mexico, which forms part of what Michael Dash terms “the Other America,” and on Malcolm Lowry, whose writing has rarely been examined from a postcolonial perspective; rather than address West or South Africa, or even Kenya, I focus on Tanzania and Zanzibar, which have been neglected in discussions of Anglophone colonial and postcolonial African writing; and finally, rather than India, I choose Sri Lanka, the island in the subcontinent’s shadow, where again, colonial and postcolonial literature have scarcely been examined. My focus on Harris, Gurnah and Gunesequera is not intended to suggest that these authors are “nativist” ethnographers of their homelands. The positionality of the authors—where they are writing from, the historical context they are writing in, whether they choose to write in English or another language—must inform any interpretation of aesthetic and political differences in their approach to paradise.<sup>46</sup> I will discuss affinities and singularities in their versions of paradise discourse, while arguing that they share a common purpose of transformation: the reconfiguration of a common store of

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<sup>46</sup> Indeed, all three authors have chosen to live in and write in England, largely because of the lack of a publishing industry—and therefore of an audience—in their homelands, and this itself raises questions about their choice to adopt a motif which possesses its own “exilic” logic and which has a particular appeal to Western audiences.



metaphors, either for the purpose of voicing a systemic critique, or for inventing a new mythopoetics.

## Outline of Thesis

My first chapter addresses the twin dynamics of infernalization and exoticization in colonial representations of Mexico as a “fatal” paradise, considering 15-19<sup>th</sup>-century Anglophone and Hispanophone texts as well as early 20<sup>th</sup>-century travel writing by British writers such as Greene, Waugh, and Huxley visiting the “informal empire.” My second chapter reads Malcolm Lowry’s *Under the Volcano* in context with Wilson Harris’s concept of “divine comedy” in *Carnival* and *Companions of the Day and Night* and Juan Rulfo’s “inverted paradise” in *Pedro Páramo*, in order to show how Lowry adapts the motif of the “infernal paradise” to represent colonial exploitation and postcolonial guilt. My third chapter uncovers the imagination of East Africa as a paradisaical metaphysical terrain in texts ranging from Homer’s *Odyssey*, Dante’s *Purgatorio*, Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, and Camões’ *Lusiads* through to 19<sup>th</sup>-century literature by British and German writers; and explores the interplay between the Islamic and European imagination of Swahili Tanganyika. My fourth chapter reads Abdulrazak Gurnah’s *Paradise* in context with other contemporary literature about Zanzibar and Tanzania by Shiva Naipaul, Roger King, and Giles Foden, to show how Gurnah deconstructs the “fair land/black coast” dichotomy used to represent Swahili East Africa. My fifth chapter traces the formation of Ceylon’s mythic reputation as a spiritual and material paradise in texts ranging from Robert Knox’s *An Historical Relation* and 19<sup>th</sup>-century texts by William Knighton, Harriet Martineau, and Ernst Hæckel, to early 20<sup>th</sup>-century writing, including Leonard Woolf’s *Village in the Jungle*, John Still’s *The Jungle Tide*, and Arthur C. Clarke’s *Fountains of Paradise*, in order to show the shift towards the representation as Ceylon as an endangered ecological paradise or utopian space threatened by dystopian ethnic violence. My sixth chapter explores Romesh Gunasekera’s various uses of the paradise motif in *Reef*, *The Sandglass*, and *Heaven’s Edge* to subvert myths of Sri

Lanka as an ecological Eden or nation-paradise to be regained through violence, and to criticize the forces of global capitalism influencing the island's re-packaging as postcolonial exotic. I conclude with a brief discussion of the continued and problematic viability of the paradise myth, its potential to be both utopian and pathological.



# Chapter 1

## Gold-land of “Wild Surmise”: Mexico, Colonialism, and Informal Imperialism

“What is the status *today* of a place that was once the site of the Earthly Paradise? Could mere men enter there, use that land and exploit its riches? Is it consecrated land, God’s land? Is this place *res derelictae*?”

- Abel Posse, *The Dogs of Paradise* (1987)

Paradise, in association with the discourses of utopia, marvel, mission, “noble savagery,” and natural history, surfaces throughout the literature of exploration and colonialism in South America, evolving in response to changing historical and economic conditions. In my introduction, I described Columbus’ famous ascription of a “moral economy” to gold which compensates for his failure to discover the earthly paradise by imagining the New World as a terrain to be conquered for Catholicism. Ecstatically alluding to Revelation and Isaiah in his letters to Isabella and Ferdinand, Columbus promises that the “new heaven” of the future will be created on the present earth, thus initiating the “perennial imaginative association of America with the promise of apocalyptic historical renewal” (Zamora 7).<sup>1</sup> Nor does he abandon his search to find a western route to the gold of Japan and the spice-lands of Asia. Arriving in Cuba, he writes to Pope Alexander the Sixth that he has discovered the gold-lands of the east: “The island of Hispaniola is Tarschish, Ophir and Zipangu” (Humboldt “Fluctuations” 10). Thus, he reinvents gold-land as a topos signifying the dialectic between paradise

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<sup>1</sup> Zamora sees contemporary Latin American writers as either perpetuating or deconstructing this imaginary, citing Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes’ *Terra Nostra* as a text which opposes the “decidedly masculine” and Eurocentric orientation of apocalypse by “integrating apocalyptic visions from mythological sources other than the Judeo-Christian” (7). Chilean Abel Posse’s *Dogs of Paradise* is another text which counters the European imagination of the Americas as a heaven and earth to be made anew through violence and divine providence, by setting the apocalyptic visions of Incan and Aztec prophets foreseeing the threat to their civilization against Columbus’ Judeo-Christian mysticism.

and apocalypse, spiritual mission and economic possession: city of Gold, city of God.<sup>2</sup>

Throughout the European imagination of the New World, Columbus' conflated paradise/gold-land remains a powerfully reproductive form of *mimetic capital*: the "set of images and image-making devices that are *accumulated*, 'banked' in books, archives, collections, cultural storehouses until such time as these representations are called upon to generate new representations" (Greenblatt 6). As evocations of both the economic and the unknown, paradise and gold-land are particularly consonant with the modern capitalist will "to cross immense distances, and in the search for profit, to encounter and to represent radically unfamiliar human and natural objects" (Greenblatt 6). In this chapter, I will trace the evolution of myths of paradise and gold-land in particular relation to Mexico, showing how they function as expressions of the pursuit of both literal and discursive capital. Mexico is unique in achieving independence a century earlier than the other sites I will discuss, and in remaining the sole possession of one colonial power until that independence, unlike Ceylon and East Africa, which were the subject of incursions by multiple European colonial powers. Furthermore, Mexico's hugely varied, volcanic geography renders the paradise myth more unstable, less containable, than in its application to the bounded islands of the Caribbean, Zanzibar, or Ceylon.<sup>3</sup> This necessarily produces discursive differences in the "Occidentalist" imaginary, and I will trace throughout this chapter the particular connotations of depravity which the paradise myth acquires in Mexico in order to accommodate the alterity of the Amerindians, to respond to independence, to express informal imperial desire, and to vilify revolution.

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<sup>2</sup> Wilson Harris links the "religious and economic thirst for exploration" of the "Spanish conquistador, of the Portuguese, French, Dutch, and English, of Raleigh, of Fawcett," into the conflated image of "El Dorado, City of Gold, City of God" ("Tradition" 144).

<sup>3</sup> Douglas Veitch describes Mexico's geography as a "myriad of cubistic planes" (8), a "recalcitrant topography" where "the process of vulcanization and erosion are starkly extreme and palpable" and where "the landscape is one of tensions and vivid contrasts", between cactus desert and tropical jungle, plains, plateaus, mountains, and coasts (10). It is generally on the peninsular coasts that 20<sup>th</sup>-century tourist paradises have been established.



## El Dorado, Montezuma's Gold, and the "Fatal Mystique"

"Even jade is shattered,  
Even gold is crushed,  
Even quetzal plumes are torn."

-Nezahualcoyotl, "Nahuatl Flower Song" (c. 1431-72)

When Hernan Cortés and his men hacked through the mountains of Chalco and first beheld the capital city of the Aztecs, their marvel fused with delight at the seeming confirmation of their dreams of fabulous wealth:

As they advanced, their doubts were removed, but their amazement increased. They were now full satisfied that the country was rich beyond any conception which they had formed of it, and flattered themselves that at length they should obtain an ample recompense for all their services and sufferings. (Robertson 51)

After the purgatory of their travels, Tenochtitlán was the paradise of their reward. With the conquest (1519-20), myths proliferated of "Montezuma's gold," great quantities of treasure hidden by Indians or spirited away by an Aztec caravan. Bernal Diaz del Castillo's *Conquest of New Spain* (1632) describes how Cortés' men scattered throughout the Mexican interior like a pack of hounds hunting gold: "In Montezuma's tribute books we looked for the districts from which he was brought gold, and where there were mines, or cacao, or cloth for cloaks; and...we wanted to go there" (cited in Hemming 9). Mexico was confirmed as the Chryse of the west, unleashing a "gold-rush mentality" throughout South America, as conquistadors rushed to discover a gold-mine that would yield a steady flow of treasure, or, if not, "to grow rich as parasites on the native population" (Hemming 51).

Before 1522, America furnished gold only, but with the discovery of the mines of the Cordilleras, Mexico became a silver-land, an Argyré.<sup>4</sup> By 1660, 18,000 tons of silver had been delivered to Spain, positioning the Atlantic at the centre of the new world-system and Amerindia as the fundamental structure of the first

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<sup>4</sup> The production of silver from the mines of Tasco, Zacatecas, and Pachuca in New Spain and Potosí in Peru was so immense that the price of gold rose (Humboldt "Fluctuations" 12).

modernity (Dussell 10-1). Sixty years after the arrival of the Spanish, two-thirds of the population of the Aztec and Inca had been decimated, dying of pox, slaughter, or over-work in the mines. By 1550, the myth of gold-land had already acquired infernal connotations, as Jesuit Domingo de Santo Tomás observed in a letter to Seville: “It was four years ago, to conclude the perdition of this land, that a mouth of hell was discovered through which every year a great many people are immolated, which the greed of the Spaniards sacrifice to their god that is gold, and it is a mine of silver which is named Potosí” (Dussell 11). Similarly, in *Historia de las Indias* (1562), Bartolomé de las Casas describes a series of “plagues” in Hispaniola and San Juan— of ants, rebellious slaves, and smallpox—as divine retribution for the enslavement of Africans and the extermination of the indigenous population. The plagues constitute “a supra-personal and eschatological punishment” for the Spaniards’ creation of artificial paradises of privilege: “Hell.” (Benitez-Rojo 100-107). Yet, others adapted Columbus’ moral economy to revitalize gold-land in the name of mission. Jesuit naturalist José de Acosta’s *Historia natural y moral de las Indias* (1552) imagines New Spain as a fallen paradise of mineral resources whose very exploitation will be its redemption: “God placed the greatest abundance of mines...[in remote places] so that this would invite men to seek those lands and hold them...This is what God did with that difficult land, giving it much wealth in mines so that by this means he would find someone who wanted it” (cited in Kirkpatrick 295). The infernal is displaced onto the “difficult,” heathen land, and away from the hell produced by Spanish colonization. The most famous myth of gold-land, El Dorado, similarly displaces the guilt of the conquistador by emptying the city of its inhabitants.<sup>5</sup>

Although El Dorado’s fabulous ruins and unimaginable wealth still exist somewhere, awaiting discovery, its people and their golden ruler have vanished,

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<sup>5</sup> Although El Dorado is primarily seen as a myth of the Amazonian interior, it could be argued to be Mexican as well, such explorers ventured as far north as Chihuahua in New Spain (present-day New Mexico) in search of the fabled city. Nor has El Dorado wholly lost currency as a myth capable of titillating Western desire. Its treasures are still pursued in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In 1965, Colombian prospector Jaramillo Sánchez declares: “I am completely certain that the famous treasury of the Chibchas is to be found in the bottom of Lake Gutavita...It is logical that the veritable Dorado is at its bottom” (cited in Hemming 198). When American treasure hunters read his proclamation in the Wall Street Journal, they formed the Columbian Exploration Inc., determined to drain the lake dry and seize the imagined plunder, until they were stopped by the Columbian Institute of Anthropology (Hemming 198).



thus freeing Europeans to claim the city for their own. Yet traces of fatality haunt El Dorado—the deaths of the Incas preserved in the memories of those who escaped Peru and passed on the half-remembered myth of the gilded man to the gullible conquistadors—the deaths of the Europeans pursuing the deadly myth through the jungles of South America. Gold-land turns between the longing for an empty, abundant land before the fall, and the infernal repressed memory of violation, the fall which has already occurred:

El Dorado, which had begun as a search for gold, was becoming something more. It was becoming a New World romance, a dream of Shangri-la, the complete, unviolated world. Such a world had existed and the Spaniards had violated it. Now with a sense of loss that quickened their imagination, the Spaniards wished to have the adventure again. (Naipaul “Loss” 17)

Such knowledge of loss and transgression facilitates the creation of a mystique of retribution which attaches a purgatorial significance to their quest. Afflicted by deadly fevers, infected with “grievous flux,” they hallucinate that they are barred from paradise by “wonderful dangerous” waters and terrible plague. If “the instinctive idealism” of their adventure has been “overpowered within individual and collective by enormous greed, cruelty, and exploitation” (Harris “Tradition” 144), then they seek exoneration by displacing their violation of paradise, their decimation of its inhabitants by epidemics and by force, in upon their own sickening bodies.

In Walter Raleigh’s *Discovery of the Large, Rich, and Beautiful Empire of the Guiana* (1595), the deeper his company penetrate Orinoco, the more agonizing their tribulations: “The further we went on, our victual decreasing and the air breeding great faintness, we grew weaker and weaker” (97). Yet, having righteously endured the trials of the abject bush, the Englishmen are rewarded with paradise:

On both sides of this river, we passed the most beautiful country that ever mine eyes beheld: and whereas all that we had seen before was nothing but woods, prickles, bushes, and thorns, here we beheld plains of twenty miles in length, the grasses short and green, and in divers parts groves of trees by

themselves, as if they had been by all the art and labour in the world so made of purpose. (98)

From a jungle of prickly and thorn, Raleigh imagines passing into an Elizabethan garden, “an Eden made for possession, a nature ordered by the ‘art and labour’ of an invisible hand, beckoning man to enter. Fiery swords, then paradise” (Strachan 29). In this paradise of “lively prospects,” every stone Raleigh stoops to take up “promise[s] either gold or silver by his complexion” (110) and “the soil is so excellent and so full of rivers, as it will carry sugar, ginger, and all those other commodities” (120).<sup>6</sup> Raleigh’s El Dorado conveniently expresses the material and spiritual aspects of paradise myth and connects the empty, abundant Eden with the mystique of retributive fatality more characteristic of Mexico.

Unlike El Dorado, Tenochtitlán was no empty gold-land. In Mexico, the conquistadors were resisted by the advanced, complex civilization of the Aztecs, who were themselves conquerors and enslavers.<sup>7</sup> Like the Spanish, they mythologized Mexico as a paradise and its conquest as their divine mission. The story of the founding of their capital describes their pilgrimage in search of the Lake of the Moon, a place of ethereal purity. In the valley of Meztlipan, they find an eagle perched on a cactus in a snowy lake, grasping a snake in its beak, and begin to exult and marvel:

Now we have reached the promised land, now we have seen what comfort and rest have been vouchsafed to the Mexica people...We have now discovered and achieved what our God promised you, for He told us we should see wonders among the bulrushes and reed-grasses of this place.  
(cited in Nicholson 51)

The Sun God Huitzilopochtli commands them to conquer the valley, destroy the peoples with it, and set up an imperial metropolis, that they might be rewarded with a paradise of material wealth and spiritual attainment:

O, Mexicans...here must you keep guard and wait, and the four quarters of the earth you must conquer, win and subject to yourselves...if you are to

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<sup>6</sup> Yet, fixed on gold-land, his ultimate capitalist fantasy, Raleigh reminds his reader “where there is store of gold, it is in effect needless to remember the other commodities for trade” (119).

<sup>7</sup> The Mexica’s drive to establish total empire in the Valley of Mexico was accompanied by an increase in mass sacrifices and a burning of their history books (Thomas 25). Itzcóatl, the king of Tenochtitlán in 1427, ordered that the Codices should be burned, so that he could set down his own official version of history.



reach and enjoy the fine emeralds, the stones of much value, the gold and silver, the fine feathers, the precious many-coloured feathers, the fine cocoa which as come from afar, the cotton of many colours, the many sweet-scented flowers, the different kinds of soft and delectable fruits, and many other things that give much pleasure and contentment. (cited in Nicholson 51)

This myth cannot be reduced to a mere justification for material conquest, since its use of symbols indicates a metaphysical sub-text in which “self-subjection is the task, emeralds the reward” (Nicholson 52). However, the conflation of material and metaphysical in the construction of Anahuac as a paradisal space is strikingly reminiscent of the European moral economy between gold-land and paradise.<sup>8</sup>

After Cortés’s conquest of the Aztecs, the Spanish founded Nueva España in 1528, which Alexander von Humboldt later singled out as more “civilized” than South America, with a richer “physical and moral culture,” as a result of the melding of the aristocratic Spanish tradition with the remnants of the former civilization of the Aztecs (131-2). Yet the European imagination of a paradisal New Spain would be continually disturbed by memories of the “infernal” Aztecs. Like the cannibalism of the Caribs, the Aztec custom of human-sacrifice functions as a version of what Wilson Harris has called “cannibal realism,” an uncanny mirror of colonial Europeans’ ravenous consumption of resources and obliteration of indigenous peoples. Unlike in the Caribbean, where by the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century the Taino, Carib, and Arawak populations had been made nearly extinct, some 11 million Indians survived the conquest in Mexico, although their numbers would dwindle to 1.5 million by 1600, demolished by slave-labour, starvation, and disease (Richmond 2). Like Gog and Magog, the disturbing Others expelled from Prester John’s Christian kingdom, this population act as reminders of “the death-cult” onto which Spanish Catholicism was grafted and of the violence underlying

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<sup>8</sup> In the Nahuatl cosmology inherited by the Mexicas, “the eagle is the sun, or the sun’s light shining upon men. The nopal cactus with its red fruit...is the heart. The heart, and the sun’s light together, at the centre of man, are holding Time, the serpent, in subjection, and are poised at their centre in the midst of the waters...at the centre of purity” (Nicholson 52). The myth thus allegorizes conquest as a spiritual pilgrimage, a self-conquest in which the precious rubies and pleasures are concomitant products, not the sole aims of enlightenment.

the colonial mission.<sup>9</sup> Even though the Catholic clergy built baroque temples over the former Indian temples, substituted the Eucharist for the consumption of maize dolls, and rewrote the customs of sacrifice as prefigurations of Christ's crucifixion, traces of pre-Columbian civilization live on, ironic precursors to the tropes of hell, paradise, and conquest so central to the colonial imagination. Paradise myth in Mexico thus accommodates the presence and conquest of the Aztecs through the invention of a "fatal mystique," portraying a dangerously beautiful landscape degraded by its "savage," death-obsessed inhabitants.

### **Silver Mines and Haciendas: The Invention of Paradise Machines**

After Montezuma's mythical hoards proved elusive, the conquistadors did not abandon the fantasy of Mexico as gold-land. Instead, the myth of (infernal) paradise was renewed through the invention of the dual machines of plantation and mine. Between 1546 and 1552, the search for gold led the Spaniards north, far beyond the Aztec empire, to the rich silver mines of Zacatecas, Real del Monte, Pachuca, and Guanajuato. By the late 16<sup>th</sup> century, silver accounted for 80 percent of all Mexican exports, fuelling the development of a dual economy in New Spain: the northern frontier economy of the silver mines and the predominantly south-central economy of haciendas. The hacienda, "evolv[ing] at the junction of Spanish power and Indian resistance" (Tutino 496) was the "most comprehensive institution yet devised for Spanish mastery and Indian subordination" (Gibson 407).<sup>10</sup> Haciendas were both agricultural estates and business enterprises, virtually

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<sup>9</sup> Delumeau's history of paradise charts the "always fascinating and disturbing kingdom" in which Prester John's paradisiacal land is located and on whose borders dwell "the accursed peoples of Gog and Magog" (86-7). Described in Ezekiel as heralds of the Apocalypse, and thought to have been imprisoned behind a mountain barrier, in the medieval period "these peoples became almost inseparable from the kingdom of Prester John, and their country—whether on an island or on the mainland [became] a kind of photographic negative of Prester John's" (Delumeau 87). Gog and Magog are the "unclean," "dark" peoples, excluded from the margins of empire and paradise. The figure of the Indian proliferates in the writing of literary travellers because it is a reminder of those who have been excluded or destroyed to build New Spain. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Mexican Revolution is read as an apocalyptic sign that the "mountain barrier" of Spanish civilization has lifted, so that the indigenous peoples threaten to spread and reclaim the kingdom as their own. I discuss Gog and Magog in reference to Islamic myth in Chapters 3 and 4.

<sup>10</sup> From the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century, the crown provided land grants to Spanish; however, the most common way of extending property was by appropriating land from villages. In order to regularize and profit from this land, in 1591 the Spanish crown passed a new ordinance requiring all landowners possessing land acquired without a legal title to pay a *composicion* tax to the treasury (Bethell 163-4).



self-sufficient entities performing multiple economic functions, which emerged to satisfy the domestic needs of local urban and mining markets (Buve 22).<sup>11</sup>

Initially, the Indians were indentured servants rather than slaves, struggling to retain subsistence lands and avoid total dependence. Under *encomienda*, they were forced to labour on the haciendas without pay, but were allowed to return to their villages after fixed contracts. However, when the Spanish crown imposed heavier taxes, landowners resorted to slavery to acquire a permanent work force (Bethell 164-5). In 1548, in response to the lobbying of Bartolomé de las Casas, Indian slavery was abolished and African slaves began to be imported in large numbers. Yet the sheer demand for labour on haciendas and mines could not be fulfilled by Africans alone (Bethell 164). Hence, the Spanish crown implemented the system of draft labour known as *repartimiento*, requiring Indians to work at set rates during certain seasons of the year. The Indians were forced to comply in order to earn money to pay taxes (Bethell 165). At the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, they petitioned to be hired in a free market, but this only instituted a new form of servitude, “indebted peonage,” in which *hacendados* (plantation owners or overseers) attracted workers by offering advances on future wages, then kept them legally tied to the hacienda through debt. The haciendas became a self-contained unit of production, staffed by a year-round workforce of peons and ruled by the *hacendados*, masters, legislators, judges, and magistrates in one (Bethell 168).

In the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century, the sudden diversion of mercury to Bolivia provoked a crisis in silver production and caused widespread bankruptcy among miners and *hacendados*. Under the pressure of heavy taxes, debt, land lost as collateral for loans, and the division of estates amongst landowners’ children, many haciendas began to shrink or disappear. In order to prevent total collapse, haciendas formed interrelated, complementary production complexes, supplying each others’ shortages (Bethell 178), and landowners initiated the practice of *mayorazgo*, making family properties indivisible so that they had to be transmitted whole from one generation to the next (Larson 289). *Hacendados* purchased titles of nobility and linked them to their estates, further consolidating land, wealth, class and

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<sup>11</sup> Incorporating tanneries, soap and textile factories, carpenters and smiths, they produced meat, dairy products, hides, tallow, draught and pack animals, and other consumer goods (Bethell 177).

political power. A small nucleus of families soon possessed the most fertile lands, monopolized the urban and mining markets, controlled the only source of credit, and derived the majority of their money income by manipulating the network of external and internal trade (Bethell 186-7).

Unlike other colonies, whether distinctions between colonizer and colonized remained distinct, the original structure of “republics” separating Spaniards from Indians broke down in response to the need for Indian labour in the haciendas, mines, and urban centres, thus initiating a period of intense, if uneven transculturation between indigenous, African and European peoples. The colonial society which developed was stratified by race and class. At the bottom were indigenous groups, who were protected from the Inquisition and received some social services of health and education, but were forced to pay head taxes and forbidden to own property as individuals.<sup>12</sup> Above them were the landless whites and the mixed-race *castas*, or mestizos, who were barred from administrative careers and worked many of the same jobs as the natives, although they had different rights. At the top of the hierarchy were the white upper classes, comprised of *peninsulares*, high-class administrators born in Spain, and *criollos*, rich landowners born in Mexico. Seen as tainted by their upbringing in the “decadent” tropics, *criollos* tended to marry *peninsulares* to achieve upward social mobility.

### **“Occidental Paradise” or English “Canaan”: Reconquering 17<sup>th</sup>-Century Mexico**

By the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the representation of America as utopia or paradise had become a commonplace historiographical figure (Ross 46). In Mexico, *criollo* intellectuals sought to adopt the paradise myth while repressing its violent associations with colonization and exploitation. Mary Louise Pratt has identified the representational strategy of the “anti-conquest” through which European travellers to South America sought to distance themselves from the earlier

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<sup>12</sup> A final group, marginalized in modern narratives of Chicano identity and *mestizaje*, consisted of black African slaves (Richmond 1), and from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards, Chinese coolies (Yun and Laremont 101).



violence of conquest at the same time as they re-asserted the values of European hegemony and imperialism (Pratt 7). The anti-conquest constructs an Edenic edifice of South America as “an unclaimed and timeless space occupied by plants and creatures (some of them human), but not organized by societies and economies” (Pratt 126). In this “flourishing primal world,” nature is distinguished by its diverse accumulation of resources from herbs, honey, grains, and sugar to minerals, gold, and silver, but also by its conspicuous lack of harvesters. The main protagonist is the European “seeing-man...he whose imperial eyes passively look out and possess” (Pratt 7). The presence of indigenous people or civilizations is repressed, thus “ordaining” the explorer to penetrate paradise’s “empty” yet “abundant” interior.

In Nueva España, *criollo* writers devised similar strategies to establish themselves as “innocent” founders of a western paradise of creole culture, distinct from ubiquitous Spanish influence. The baroque was a period of dynamic cultural change, in which intellectuals struggled to reconcile the living ruins of Aztec history with their vision of the landscape as permeated by a creole identity, “less El Dorado or Utopia than the land of Cockaigne—a land, that is of change and exchange” (Tudela x). Paradise shifted away from the crude hunger of El Dorado to myths of natural abundance or spiritual purity, as in *La grandeza mexicana* (1603) where colonial epic poet Bernardo de Balbuena imagines a natural world of perpetual spring: “In this Mexican paradise the entire year is Mays and Aprils, agreeable weather, a gentle cold, the sky serene and clear, the winds light” (94).<sup>13</sup> However, it was Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora, a leading scientist and intellectual of the Mexican baroque era, who would forge the most powerful new moral economy of paradise.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> “En este paraíso mexicano todo el año es aquí mayos y abril, tiempo agradable, frío comedido, cielo sereno y claro, aires sutiles.”

<sup>14</sup> “Educated by the Jesuits in the mould of Kircher, Gassendi, and Descartes, Sigüenza (1645-1700) was a skilled mathematician and astronomer, a scrupulous calendarist, a groundbreaking ethnographer, a meticulous historian, a daring political allegorist, and an influential novelist. His writings...place him on the threshold of that period of occidental intellectual history in which Baroque polymathesis began to be challenged by Enlightenment rigor” (Johnson “Periwigged” 403).

In *Parayso Occidental* (1684) Góngora retells the story of the Conquest and “discovery” of New Spain using the “western paradise” of a Catholic convent as a metaphor for the redemption and respatialization of Mexico through colonial mission.<sup>15</sup> Góngora explains that Columbus’ ships erred in course because “his eager intelligence” was so “enthused with subjugation of the soiled darkness of heathenism by the splendors of the Gospels, he mistook West for East” (cited in Ross 62).<sup>16</sup> Columbus’ failure to find the earthly paradise was redeemed by the Spanish founding and funding of an “improved paradise”— *el mejorado Parayso*—in the New World, where the knowledge of God obtained in the first Paradise but lost through sin could be rediscovered in “occiseptrentional America” (cited in Ross 62).<sup>17</sup> Góngora precipitates a geographical inversion where paradise is no longer east, but west, thus reconfiguring the world from his criollo perspective so that Europe itself, the Old World, becomes the East. The Columbian moment reverses the direction of power, “transferring all the light of the East to the dark West”<sup>18</sup> (cited in Ross 64). As the repository of the nuns’ chastity and faith, the convent is a metonym for the virgin land of the New World, transformed from infidel darkness into a garden of spirituality. Upon conversion to Christianity, Western America becomes able to “blazonarse Oriente,” emblazon itself as a new paradise which “better[s] in its magnificence that delicious Paradise, with which the East was exalted in the infancy of the world” (cited in Ross 64).<sup>19</sup>

The Conquest is no longer figured as an act of violent, material appropriation of lands and resources, but rather as the spiritual conquest of the souls and bodies of women, brides of Christ whose religious miracles and visions confirm the guilelessness of New Spain’s rulers (Ross 52). Paradise is founded in the preservation of virginity, rather than the rape of the land, in the suppression of

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<sup>15</sup> The work’s full title is *Parayso Occidental, plantado y cultivado por la liberal benefica mano de los muy Catholicos y poderosos Reyes de España Nuestros Señores en su magnifico Real Convento de Jesus Maria de Mexico*; I cite Kathleen Ross’ version and translation of the text throughout.

<sup>16</sup> “Afanandose su discretissimo zelo en que sojsgasen los resplandores del Evangelio á las denegridas tinieblas del gentilismo, equivocò el Ocaso con El Oriente, trasladando quanto havia de claridad en el Oriente al obscuro Occaso.”

<sup>17</sup> “En esta Occiseptentrional America se convervase estable.”

<sup>18</sup> “Trasladando quanto havia de claridad en el Oriente al obscuro Ocaso.”

<sup>19</sup> “Mejorando en el su magnificencia aquel delicioso Parayso, con que en las niñezes el mundo se engrandeciò el Oriente.”



desire, rather than the lust for gold. Góngora's Edenic edifice merges the discourses of theology and natural history to re-imagine the plantation not as a site of indigenous violence, but rather of spiritual order: the *Parayso* is "plantado y cultivado," planted and cultivated, the rational nuns are like the flowers which fill the convent's gardens, subjected to classification and control (cited in Ross 63). It follows that this conquest of nature—spiritual and botanical—should move beyond the convent. The transformation of the pagan land into a new, Christian paradise extends to the capital itself: "The heavily populated city of Mexico being back then the greatest theatre of abominable impiety, how could it not now be a delicious Paradise of religion and virtue" (cited in Ross 83).<sup>20</sup>

The myth of *Parayso* is also an attempt to resolve the overlapping of spheres which characterizes Góngora's baroque universe, where Old Europe meets the New World, Old Spain seeks to control New Spain, and Aztec gods clash against Catholic priests. The convent of the nuns, with their spiritual visions and ordered bodies, fuses the marvellous and the rational. Góngora lauds their spirituality as a "panegyric" to the Spanish monarch's fulfilment of divine will for America: "The most prudent King felt it necessary to enlighten the Imperial Metropolis of the new world with a better Paradise" (cited in Ross 66).<sup>21</sup> Yet Góngora downplays Spanish authority over his "western paradise" by integrating hazardous references to pre-Columbian history, such as the heathen Mexican Vestal Virgins whose "virgin holocaust" he constructs as a precursor to the "artificial purity" of the Catholic nuns (cited in Ross 67).<sup>22</sup> Thus, he *nationalizes* the church at the same time as he *naturalizes* the conquest, reinventing Mexican history as distinctly pious and uniquely *criollo* (Lomnitz 18).<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> "Siendo entonces la populosissima Ciudad De Mexico, el mayor theatro de abominable impiedad: como no havia de ser agora un delicioso Parayso de religion, y virtud?"

<sup>21</sup> "Por preciso tubo el prudentissimo Rey ilustrar su Imperial Metropoli e el Nuevo mundo con el mejorado Parayso."

<sup>22</sup> A central feature of Góngora's creole patriotism is his argument that the Aztecs had been evangelized before the arrival of the Spanish, but were led astray by the devil, and were only brought back to the true faith by the alliance of the Texcocans and Tlaxcalans with the Spaniards (Lomnitz 16)

<sup>23</sup> Claudio Lomnitz notes the emergence of nationalism in Mexico diverged in several ways from Benedict Anderson's classic account in *Imagined Communities*, in which 17<sup>th</sup> century narratives such as Góngora's played a key part: "The process of *nationalization of the church* which lies at the center of the history of Spanish (and Spanish-American) nationalisms... is at the opposite end of the spectrum posited by Anderson, who imagined that secularization was in every case at the root of nationalism" (18).

However, violence disrupts the patriarchal, imperialist narrative which Góngora strains to impose onto the lives of the Mexican nuns. Kathleen Ross notes that his original paradise is rendered an “infierno” in the concluding books of *Parayso*, when he includes *vidas* from women who write of wanting to escape the convent or to re-order it. As the Convento de Jesús María becomes a “hell” of resistance to Carmelite reforms, “its identity as a western Paradise becomes that of a Paradise lost” (Ross 138). The nuns who fail to conform are defamed in racial terms which reveal the misogyny and fear of miscegenation underlying the control of the convent. Lascivious nuns who eat aphrodisiacal chocolate, spice their foods with decadent chilli, or lazily refuse to work are condemned as *Indias*, corrupted by the decadent tropical climate (Tudela xiv). The convent serves a purpose beyond religious piety: regulating European-blooded women’s sexuality in order to preserve a *criollo* elite to dominate the Indian, African and mixed-race masses (Ross 11). The convent is literally a plantation; just as the haciendas produce the wealth to sustain the illusion of paradise for the colonial elites, the convent produces the brides of the rulers of that “paradise” and the cultural values to guide them.

The discourse of innocence constructed in *Parayso Occidental* sharply contrasts the avarice unabashedly displayed in Thomas Gage’s *The English-American his Travail by Sea and Land, or a New Survey of the West-India* (1648), the first eyewitness account of conditions in New Spain by a non-Spaniard or an Englishman. The two visions of Mexico in these works dramatically demonstrate how paradise discourse evolves in relation to imperial power and desire. Gage was born into a militant Roman Catholic family in the period of religious strife before England’s Civil War. In order to receive a Catholic education, he had to change his name and his country. He studied in Spain and at St. Omer’s in French Flanders, a school set up for exiled English Catholics, and was ordained as a priest. Tricking his way onto a Spanish ship, he sailed to Mexico to become a Dominican friar. After 16 years as a missionary in Mexico and Guatemala, Gage returned to England in 1637 and renounced Catholicism. After becoming a strict Puritan clergyman, he wrote his book to secure his respectability in the eyes of Protestants. The anti-papist screed became a bestseller in Puritan England,



appealing to religious bigotry and imperial desire for the “hidden riches” of Spanish America, where no citizens of northern Europe were allowed to settle or travel.

For Gage, Mexico’s abundance and beauty exceeds that of Catholic Europe: “Certainly had those who have so such extolled...the parts of Granada in Spain...making them the earthly Paradise, been acquainted with the New World and with Mexico they would have recanted their untruths” (76). However, this paradise is spoiled by the avariciousness of the Roman Church. Promoting the “Black Legend” of Spanish colonialism—“no people [are] more sinfull then the Spaniards in America” (xviii)—Gage details the exploitation of Indians, Africans and mulattoes by Spanish landowners. Imitating Protestant confessions, he admits his own cupidity in charging fees for Mass and extorting money from the natives, but praises God for his deliverance from the infinitely greater greed of the Spanish friars:

For He suffered not the meanest and unworthiest of all his creatures... to be wedded to the pleasures and licentiousness which do there allure, to be fluttered with the plenty and dainties of fish, flesh, fowls, and fruits, which do there entice; to be puffed up with the spirit of pride and powerful command and authority over the poor Indians, which doth there provoke...[or] finally to be glued in heart and affection to the dross of gold, silver, pearls, and jewels, whose plenty there doth bind, blind, captivate, and enslave the soul. (103)

Mexico, the Catholic paradise of temptation, is imagined as an infernal mirror to the other America of the north, settled by Protestants who do not mistreat Amerindians. At the same time as Gage attributes depravity to Spanish colonialism, he constructs imperial England in a discourse of innocence, based on the difference in English colonizing practices.<sup>24</sup> The Mexican “western paradise” can only become paradisaical if it is Protestant, and it can only be Protestant if conquered by the English.

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<sup>24</sup> See Thomas Scanlan’s *Colonial Writing and the New World 1583-1671* (1999) for an examination of the ways in which English writers use the Black Legend of Spanish cruelty to construct a narrative of distinctively English national identity based on different English colonizing practices.

If Gage's intention was to shock his English Puritan public by presenting an accountant's view of the extravagance of the Roman Church, he was also busy calculating England's potential profits. He portrays himself as Caleb, enduring purgatorial trials throughout his survey of the "state, condition, strength, and commodities" of New Spain (102). Only by divine will is he spared from a stunning variety of near-deaths, "suffered not" to be "lost in wildernesses where no tongue could give directions," devoured by "wolves, lions, tigers, or crocodiles," to "fall from steepy rocks and mountains" into "fearful spectacles of deep and profound precipices," to be "eaten up by the greedy earth which there doth often quake and tremble," to be "stricken with fiery darts of Heaven and thunderbolts" or to be "enchanted by Satan's instruments, witches and sorcerers" (102). Gage's Mexico is an infernal land of savage nature, black magic, and infinite fatality: a complete reverse of the Linnaean image of ordered nature or of Góngora's calm, Catholic paradise. Yet, he returns from the promised land bearing reports of its great riches:

Oh, I say, let the Lord's great goodness and wonderful providence be observed who suffered not an English stranger in all these dangers to miscarry, but was a guide unto him there in all his travels, discovered unto him as to the spies in Canaan and as to Joseph in Egypt, the provision, wealth, and riches of that world, and safely guide him back to relate to England the truth of what no other English eye did ever yet behold. (103)

Mexico's depravity is a product of Spanish occupation, but it might be easily be redeemed and become England's "New Canaan," a rich, southern counterpoint to the materially impoverished, but spiritually enlightened New England colonies.

Gage's fantasies of British imperial possession were rooted in political reality. He received an eager audience for his theory "that the Spanish possessions in much of America could easily be seized by an enterprising nation, such as England" (xvi). Oliver Cromwell and his advisors were already avid readers of earlier texts justifying English exploration and colonial venture, including Richard Hakluyt's explicitly nationalist *Discourse of Western Planting* (1584) and *Principal Navigations of the English Nation* (1589, 1598-1600), Raleigh's *Discovery of Guiana*, and George Peckham's *Discoveries of Sir Humphrey Gilbert* (1584). These Elizabethan texts were motivated by imperial competitiveness, for while the



Portuguese had sailed to East Africa and the Spice Islands, and the Spanish had conquered the southern American continent, England had yet to profit from the New World. During the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Spain retained its monopoly on the Atlantic “mercantile system,” controlling the accumulation and shipping of “treasure” and the maintenance of colonial populations (Strong 231). England’s colonies in North America had failed to yield gold or silver equivalent to the riches of Spanish America; instead, settlers had to cultivate tobacco, indigo, and rice. Most English knowledge of Mexico derived from translated accounts of Las Casas, Acosta and other Spanish historians, rather than from firsthand knowledge. Thus, Gage’s eyewitness account of the gold, silver, sugar and dye-rich colonies of New Spain, with special emphasis on its mines and plantations, excited English imperial desire and envy.<sup>25</sup>

In 1654, Gage submitted a memorandum to Cromwell urging England to target Chiapas as the first object of an attack on Spanish colonial possessions, before proceeding to a full-scale conquest. He skilfully appealed to Cromwell’s economic and religious motives, and argued that Spanish would be easy to expel from the sparsely populated territories, since the Indians would offer no opposition but would rather join their liberators. In response, the Lord Protector organized a secret naval expedition to the West Indies (Thompson xviii). Cromwell already desired the economic supremacy of England, which could only be achieved by breaking Spain’s monopoly on the West Indies. However, his desire to overthrow the Spanish was aligned with the spirit of a Protestant crusade in which Protestantism and religious freedom would be established in the Spanish territories, thus extending the true kingdom of Christ into the Americas (Strong 229).<sup>26</sup> In 1655, Cromwell’s fleet descended upon the Spanish Main and attacked the unprepared colonies of Hispaniola and Jamaica. Repeated attempts to conquer Havana failed, but the English captured Jamaica before abandoning the

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<sup>25</sup> Gage himself borrowed liberally from Las Casas, copied sections from Thomas Nicholas’ translation of Gomara’s *The Pleasant Historie of the Conquest of the West India, now called New Spaine* (1578) and most likely borrowed from Purchas, Hakluyt, and Raleigh as well (Strong 234).

<sup>26</sup> Cromwell wrote to prominent ministers in Massachusetts Colony promising that if they would be willing to be move to Jamaica that “by their light they may enlighten the parts about them,” they would be provided with “towns, habitations, and staple commodities” (cited in Strong 230).

endeavour.<sup>27</sup> After 1648, no further eyewitness reports of Mexico were published by northern European observers, who faced imprisonment if they dared enter Spanish territory on voyages of commercial experiment or reconnaissance.

## **Conquest as Cultivation: 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Independence and Investment**

“I am not blind to the union of opinion as once expressed by scientists and experts that Mexico will one day furnish the gold, silver, copper and precious stones that will built the empires of tomorrow and make future cities of the world veritable New Jerusalems.”

- Cecil Rhodes (c. 1890)

Over the 18<sup>th</sup> century, as the British East India Company's power grew, English envy of Spanish America's “hidden treasures” abated. Little more was learned about Mexico until the 19<sup>th</sup> century. When the Spanish American revolutions broke out after 1810, a surge of British travellers entered South America, including thousands of mercenaries serving in the anti-colonial struggle against Spain, as well as a “capitalist vanguard” of engineers, mineralogists, breeders, agronomists sent as advance scouts by companies of European investors (Pratt 146). Mexico achieved independence in 1821, followed by the independence of the entire continent by 1825. The decentralization of the Spanish political order inaugurated a “capitalist scramble for America” creating new economic openings for Britain (Grieshaber 118). British private businessmen had financed the republican cause, and in return, the new American nations pursued what they hoped would be a profitable economic alliance with Britain, which Simón Bolívar called “that mistress of the universe” (Pratt 147).

Unlike 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup>-century conquistadors, who had been disappointed when they discovered mountains of iron ore rather than gold, British investors were keen to secure sources of raw materials and food supplies. With the Industrial Revolution, Mexico's sugar, coffee, henequen, and silver became valuable commercial goods

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<sup>27</sup> They realized the impracticality of conquering Spanish territories when they did not, as commanding officer Sedgwick argued, “have enough men to occupy places captured and so could not hope to effect our interest in the dispersing anything of the knowledge of the true God in Christ Jesus to the inhabitants” (Strong 230).



on a world scale and precipitated a full-scale export economy which resulted in the expansion of the haciendas and intensified exploitation of labourers (Grieshaber 118). In the course of the century, the former Iberian colonial territories passed from independence to economic dependence on European capital. Presaging colonization by US transnational capital in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, Britain exercised a policy of *laissez-faire* imperialism throughout Latin America. Formal empire as practiced in India and Africa was “time-consuming, troublesome and expensive: it was to be avoided if at all possible” (Lewis 18). In nations where British commercial interests were threatened by political instability, Britain colonized. However, in Mexico, where local elites welcomed commercial links, “informal means sufficed as Britain’s naval supremacy and competitive edge secured hegemony” (Lewis 19). George Ward, the first British ambassador, negotiated numerous political and economic concessions from Mexico’s first president Guadalupe Victoria (Lomnitz 30).<sup>28</sup>

The opening of Spanish America resulted in the revival of the ideology of a “New Continent” pregnant with apocalyptic renewal, where history might begin anew under the leadership of Northern Europeans. Alexander von Humboldt’s *Views of Nature* (1808) codified the European imaginary of America as “primal nature brought into being as a state in relation to the prospect of transformative intervention from Europe” (Pratt 126). In Mexico, this revivification of myth translated to an imagination of the landscape as a “savage terrain,” a “waste” ready to be reworked by Northern Europeans and transformed into “silver-land.” The disintegration of the Spanish colonial structure had left Mexico’s silver mines derelict and in need of infusions of foreign capital and technological expertise. The publication of Humboldt’s *Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain* (1811), the most influential book written on Mexico by a foreign observer, generated a myth of the “metallick wealth of Mexico” (142) which almost single-handedly produced a British investment in silver mining. Humboldt portrays the mining industry as a slumbering giant whose productivity has been crippled by colonial inefficiency: “it [is] probable, considering the present method of

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<sup>28</sup> Great Britain was the first European power to recognize Mexico as a nation, and already had considerable ties to Mexico through Scottish Masonic lodges, to which a large proportion of Mexico’s political elite belonged (Lomnitz 30).

working...that the annual produce of the mines of Mexico will admit of an augmentation" (109). However, while Humboldt carefully plots the geographical position of "the enormous mass of silver which flows annually" from the 3000 mines of Mexico to Europe and describes "metallic veins of extraordinary wealth and *extent*" (117), he criticizes the concentration on precious metals. Instead, he anticipates that European industrialization will soon produce a demand for other raw materials: "An enlightened administration will give encouragement to those labours which are directed to the extraction of mineral substances of an *intrinsic value*...and they will feel that working of a mine of coal, iron, or lead may become as profitable as that of a vein of silver" (107).

When the British investment boom in silver mining went bust in 1830, Humboldt was widely blamed for exaggerating Mexico's production capability (Pratt 131).<sup>29</sup> Yet, Humboldt never intended to promote the myth of Mexico as a "metalliferous" treasure-land (142). Instead, he concludes that agriculture "is the true national wealth of Mexico; for the produce of the earth is in fact the sole basis of permanent opulence" (95). Pratt argues that Humboldt's essay on New Spain demonstrates an ideological contrast to his writings on South America, failing to erect the same Edenic edifice of primal nature, because he perceived Mexico as less susceptible to such a conquest-by-nature (131). Indeed, his preface explains that this perception of Mexico as more advanced "excited" him to write his "particular study" of Mexican "statisticks": "I had recently visited the province of Caraccas, the banks of the Oronooko, the Rio Negro, New Granada, Quito, and the coast of Peru; and I could not avoid being struck with contrast between the civilization of New Spain, and the scanty cultivation of those parts" (1). However, Humboldt's essay on New Spain does construct Mexico in a discourse of abundance, praising it as a "fertile and inexhaustible source" of agriculture (95).

The literature of the "capitalist vanguard" of European travellers in the 1830s did not "mystify" their expansionist aims like explorers and naturalists, but rather consecrated them: "they did not present themselves as discoverers of a primal

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<sup>29</sup> While the initial British investment boom in Mexican mining and railways declined by the 1830s due to unanticipated logistic and technological difficulties, in the second half of the century British economic penetration re-accelerated (Pratt 147).



world; the bits of nature they collected were samples of raw materials, not pieces of Nature's cosmic design" (Pratt 184). Cultivating an anti-aesthetic stance, they portrayed unexploited nature as troubling or ugly, its emptiness a sign of the failure of colonial enterprise, or even as infernal, when its mountains and deserts proved an obstacle to travel, reconnaissance, and exploitation (Pratt 149). Humboldt eschews this rhetoric of aggressive conquest, and deplores the "extreme misery" (185) produced by the domination of the Indian lower classes and the unequal distribution of fortunes in this "country of inequality" (184).<sup>30</sup> Nonetheless, the essay adopts tropes of "waste," "desert," "wilderness" and "ravine" to describe those regions uncolonized by haciendas: "Men...neglect the riches which are within their reach. Collected together...on the very ridge of the Cordillera, they have allowed the regions of the greatest fertility and the nearest to the coast to remain waste and uninhabited" (89).

However, Humboldt fuses these tropes with the earlier rhetoric of contemplative, aestheticizing discovery: "What a pleasure it is for the traveller to follow these pleasant conquest of agriculture, and to contemplate the numerous Indian cottages dispersed in the wildest ravins, and necks of cultivated ground advancing into a desert country between naked and arid rocks" (361). He continually reiterates his pleasure in observing the symbiosis in which "mines insulated in the midst of wild and desert mountains" become "connected" with the "progressive cultivation" of haciendas (360). Even though many of these desert landscapes have been produced by the soil erosion and deforestation caused by colonial settlement and agricultures,<sup>31</sup> Humboldt dismisses fears of environmental degradation, insisting that the land's beautiful fertility is improved by its proximity to mines:

In Mexico the best cultivated fields, those which recall to the mind of the traveler the beautiful plains of France...surround the richest mines of the

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<sup>30</sup> Humboldt's attitude towards the Indians is by turns "ethnocentric, enlightened, racist, and optimistic" (Buchenau 17), perpetuating racist stereotypes of their lack of intelligence, but also deploring their exploitation and degradation and advocating their release from peonage.

<sup>31</sup> According to Richard Grove, "In drier regions of Central America and the Caribbean coast, cattle were found to cause serious soil erosion, with results that persist to this very day. These changes are especially well documented for highland Mexico"(63). Spanish imperialism produced severe ecological changes in Mexico: "By the end of the sixteenth century severe soil erosion and pasture damage had occurred in large parts of Mexico" as a result of the "degradational impact of new settlement and agricultures exercised in what were now economically peripheral zones" (Grove 63).

known world. Wherever metallic seams have been discovered in the most uncultivated parts of the Cordilleras, on the insulated and desert tablelands, the working of mines, far from impeding the cultivation of the soils has been singularly favourable to it. (359)

Humboldt reinvents the Edenic edifice to legitimate the peaceful conquest of Mexico's "naked," "arid," "desert" or "wild" Nature through agriculture and cultivation. Once ordered and preserved, Mexico's wilderness will not be infernal, but a pleasing contrast to industrial mines and urban centers, its fertility properly appreciated. Yet, because the colonials have failed to properly achieve this innocent "conquest of agriculture" and most of the country lies fallow, Humboldt creates an inviting myth of Mexico as open to a new history of "enlightened administration" by Northern Europeans.

## **Renewed Romances of Gold: From Keats to Haggard**

"Mira un continente Escondido

Mira un paraíso loco

Mira a los Dioses extranjeros

En las ciudades de oro liquide"

- Lila Downs, "Gente de Papel Café" (2003)

In England, Keats' "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer" (1816) might be read as a gauge of national excitement about the opening of Mexico to British colonial venture. The poem moves from evoking the literary gold of the classics, the power of the imagination—"much have I travelled in realms of gold"—to the material gold acquired through the violent conquest of the Americas:

Then I felt like some watcher of the skies

When a new planet swims into his ken

Or like stout Cortés' when with eagle eyes

He stared at the Pacific—and all his men

Looked at each other with a wild surmise

Silent, upon a peak in Darien. (lines 9-14)

Marcus Wood notes that Keats' alleged historical mistake is more likely a deliberate fusion of two seminal moments of discovery in William Robertson's



*History of America* (1788): "in conjuring up Cortés, rather than Balboa, Keats is fixing on the moment when the Spanish conquistadors suddenly realized the extraordinary resources of the empire they had stumbled upon" (242). The poem's violent conclusion is peculiar in evoking an older discourse that "celebrates Spanish destruction of the Americas as a part of Europe's irresistible imperial expansion" rather than demonizing the Black Legend of Spanish colonization (Wood 243). Elsewhere, Keats criticizes colonial venture and capitalist endeavour, but here his confused appropriation of Spanish imperial history as a symbol of the power of the imagination suggests an irresistible anticipation of the unimaginable riches offered by New Spain. The seemingly innocent pleasures of seeing and imagination signal the renewal of Mexico as gold-land, a colonial fantasy which is the precursor to conquest, this time informal.

For Rider Haggard, it was precisely the desire to wander the "realms of gold" which led him to visit Mexico in 1891 and then to write *Montezuma's Daughter* (1893), an adventure romance re-imagining the conquest of Tenochtitlán.<sup>32</sup> Drawn by the lure of archaeological riches, Haggard secured permission from the Mexican authorities to dig for antiquities and search for Montezuma's gold: "Haggard had been increasingly fascinated by Aztec civilization and its strange parallels with Egypt: the elaborate art and architecture, which even included pyramids, and the bizarre religious ceremonial, with the added piquancy of human sacrifice" (Pocock 82). In the late Victorian imagination, Mexico and Central America continued to operate as sites of conquest and informal empire.<sup>33</sup> For Britain, the infernal paradise of Mexico was driven by the machine not of plantation, but of informal imperialism. Haggard's archaeological endeavour is symptomatic of the larger pattern in Victorian culture in which British citizens and public servants plundered Amerindian antiquities from Mexico and transported

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<sup>32</sup> Haggard's trip became coloured by the infernal when he learned in Mexico that his only son, Jock, had died back in England. Predicting Thomas Wingfield's fictional words, he wrote, "Then, in truth, I descended into hell" (Pocock 86). Haggard also wrote another romance set in South America, *The Virgin of the Sun* (1922), this time avariciously obsessed not with the riches and antiquities of the Aztecs, but of the "marvellous Incas of Peru" and the legend of an "undiscovered land" where "long before the Spanish Conquerors entered on their mission of robbery and ruin" there "lived and died a White God risen from the sea"(i). However, this later novel scarcely received an audience in comparison to the popularity of *Montezuma's Daughter*.

<sup>33</sup> See Daniel D. Aguirre's *Informal Empire: Mexico and Central America in Victorian Culture* (2005).

them back to the imperial metropolis. The myth of Mexico as an anthropological treasure-house was the direct product of informal imperialism, which inaugurated a vicious cycle of looting and economic exploitation: “entrepreneurs turned their imperial/capitalist gaze towards Mexico, they procured items and sponsored London exhibitions to invite interest in investment, curious metropolitan spectators coveted these ancient artefacts because they fed into a vision of Britons as conquerors, this encouraged further exploitation of the area” (Kinsey 1).

*Montezuma's Daughter* literally imagines Britons as the new conquerors of Mexico by inserting a white Englishman into the narrative of the Conquest. The novel's protagonist, Thomas Wingfield, is born in England of mixed parentage: his father is an English noble, but his mother is a Spanish Catholic. His lineage is thus morally corrupt: “from [her] blood springs the most of such evil as is in me” (13). Haggard models Wingfield on the historical Thomas Gage: he is an interstitial figure, able to represent England, but also, by virtue of his Spanish descent and Catholic associations, able to access the closed Spanish world. In the course of seeking his fortunes, Thomas takes passage on a Spanish galleon and is shipwrecked in Anahuac on the eve of Cortés' arrival. In a parody of 16<sup>th</sup>-century travel narratives, Thomas' approach to the paradisaical New World is fraught with purgatorial tribulations. He nearly dies from thirst as he rides a barrel to shore, is afflicted by “plagues” of “venomous” insects which drive him “almost to madness,” is nearly eaten by a “monstrous and evil-looking” crocodile, and is devoured by myriads of “winged and crawling” creatures (112-3). However, when he penetrates into the interior, he is rewarded with a paradise of primordial fertility: “Up [the] trees climbed creepers that hung like ropes even from the topmost boughs, and among them were many strange and gorgeous flowering plants...In their branches also sat harsh-voiced birds of brilliant colours, and apes that barked and chattered” (116). Haggard appropriates the moment of “discovery,” attributing the first sight of the “land of surpassing beauty” to an Englishman rather than a Spaniard.

Yet this primal paradise becomes infernal when Thomas is captured by a tribe of Indians and nearly sacrificed: “Truly I had come to a land of devils!” (122). He is saved by Marina, Cortés' mistress-to-be, before moving on to Tenochtitlán, where



he marries Montezuma's daughter Otomie and acquires a life of god-like privilege. As in Haggard's other adventure romances, Mexico is represented as a feminized landscape, the object of imperial desire. The volcano Popocatepetl takes on the form of the feminine paradise, possessed by Thomas' eyes: "I could see nothing but the gigantic shape of a woman fashioned in snow...whose hair streamed down the mountain side. [...] She seemed to start out in majesty from a veil of rosy mist, a wonderful and thrilling sight" (136). However, unlike the Edenic African Kukuianaland in *King Solomon's Mines*, the Mexican paradise becomes infernal, stained with the blood of sacrifice and conquest:

In that red and fearful light the red figure of the sleeping woman arose, or appeared to rise, from its bier of stone. It arose slowly like one who awakes from sleep, and presently it stood upright upon the mountain's brow, towering high into the air. There it stood a giant and awakened corpse, its white wrappings stained with blood... (160)

Thomas' relationship to Mexico is schizophrenic: he is attracted by the golden luxury of Aztec civilization, but repulsed by what he perceives as its innate barbarity. When Cortés arrives to conquer the city, Thomas fights first for the Aztecs, then for the Spaniards, finally rationalizing the slaughter of the Aztecs as divine retribution for their grotesque customs. The narrative alternates between rhapsodic praise of the innate "nobility" of the Indian "savages" with whom Thomas (literally) has intercourse, and visceral disgust at their religion of death: they are simultaneously paradisaical and depraved. This dualism is worked out through the interracial romance, which is conveniently resolved after the fall of the Aztecs, when Otomie kills herself, freeing Thomas to return to England and marry his pure white sweetheart, Lily.

Throughout the novel, Mexico is constructed as a paradise made infernal by both Aztec practices and Spanish Catholicism. Reflecting on the Indians' "horrible rites of religion," Thomas portrays them as precursors to Protestant rituals such as baptism, and less depraved than the Spanish Inquisition: "When all is said, is it more cruel to offer up victims to the gods than to torture them in the vaults of the Holy Office or to immure them in the walls of nunneries?" (126). When Montezuma asks, "Why have your countrymen landed on my dominions and slain my people?" Thomas is quick to distance himself from the Spanish: "I am not of

their people” (140). Recalling the “Night of Sorrows,” Thomas imagines Montezuma as a “savage” King Solomon and mourns the destroyed wealth of Tenochtitlán:

I was overcome by the memory of all the strange sights that I had seen in this wonderful new land which was so civilised and yet so barbarous. I thought of that sad-faced king, the absolute lord of millions, surrounded by all that the heart of man can desire, by vast wealth, by hundreds of lovely wives, by loving children, by countless armies, by all the glory of the arts, ruling over the fairest empire on the earth, with every pleasure to his hand, a god in all things save his mortality, and worshipped as a god, and yet a victim to fear and superstition, and more heavy hearted than the meanest slave about his palaces. (142)

This demonstration of limited sympathy for the threatened Aztec culture serves to justify the superior sensitivity of British imperialism. The implication is that the British would have refrained from sacking Tenochtitlán due to their aesthetic appreciation of its culture, administering it peacefully instead. The novel opens by celebrating the defeat of the Spanish Armada and their nefarious plans of conquest: “They came to conquer, to bring us to the torture and the stake—to do to us free Englishmen as Cortes did by the Indians of Anahuac” (1). England thus displaces Mexico as the potential victim of conquest, making the ascendancy of the British empire all the more superior to fallen Spain. When the city falls, Thomas helps Montezuma’s son bury the king’s royal jewels beneath the lake and is rewarded with “a great necklace of surpassing size and beauty” (234), which he presents to Elizabeth I on his return to England. By substantiating the myth of Montezuma’s gold and symbolically deeding the right of its possession to the English queen, Haggard projects Victorian desire for Aztec antiquities into the past, thus figuratively re-capturing the lost gold-land for the new British empire ruled by Victoria. Furthermore, Haggard justifies the innocence of the British project of informal imperialism in the present time: there is no violence, no slaughter involved in this acquisition of Mexico’s monetary capital, unlike Cortés’ conquest of the physical capital. Mexico’s infernal paradise merely awaits redemption.



## Barbarous Wonderland: Progress and Revolution in Modern Mexico

“To us, God was in the beginning, Paradise and the Golden Age have been long lost, and all we can do is to win back.”

- D.H. Lawrence, *Mornings in Mexico* (1927)

“We attract and repel.”

- Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (1947)

Other scholars have extensively traced the peculiar resonance of the myth of Mexico as infernal paradise in 20<sup>th</sup>-century Anglo-American writing,<sup>34</sup> but I will examine it here in the specific context of Anglo-American informal imperialism. The rise of American imperialism in the 1890s coincided with an influx of American literary travellers to Mexico. The doctrine of “manifest destiny” had awakened American interest in their “uncivilized” neighbour earlier in the century, but continuous political turmoil dissuaded travel. Mexico’s war for independence began in 1810 and lasted until 1824. The next two decades were characterized by constant struggle between federalist and centralists. In 1834, General Antonio López de Santa Anna abrogated the federal constitution and instituted a dictatorship. After Santa Anna lost the Mexican-American War (1846-48), one-third of Mexico’s land was appropriated by the United States. In the 1860s, Mexico was invaded by Napoleonic France and the Habsburg Archduke Ferdinand Maximilian of Austria was installed on the Mexican throne as Emperor Maximilian I. However, this “Second Mexican Empire” was overthrown by the Zapotecan Benito Juárez, who restored the republic in 1867. In 1876, Porfirio Díaz, a republican general during the French invasion, came to power. His period of rule (1880-1911) over five consecutive re-elections was characterized by extreme political repression and economic inequalities, and would spark the peasant uprising in the Mexican Revolution of 1910.

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<sup>34</sup> See Drewey Wayne Gunn’s *American and British Writers in Mexico, 1556-1973* (1974), Cecil Robinson’s *Mexico and the Hispanic Southwest in American Literature* (1977), Ronald Walker’s *Infernal Paradise* (1978), Douglas Veitch’s *Lawrence, Greene and Lowry* (1978), and Daniel Cooper Alarcón’s *The Aztec Palimpsest* (1997). Anthologies whose introductions discuss Anglo-American writing but are not focused on tropes of inferno and paradise, include Edward Simmen’s *Gringos in Mexico* (1988) and Jurgen Buchenau’s *Mexico Otherwise* (2005).

Anglo-Americans were largely favourable to Diaz's dictatorship, praising him for bringing political stability and opening Mexico to economic modernization. After 1900, when oil was discovered in the rainforests of Veracruz, American and British companies completely monopolized the oil industry.<sup>35</sup> By 1910, one-third of Mexico's productive land was owned by Anglo-American mining and petroleum enclaves (Lewis 23).<sup>36</sup> The Morgan-Guggenheim merger had achieved a complete monopoly of copper output, and \$900 million of American capital was invested in the country (Turner 221). By 1913, Britain was tied for America for second largest importer of Mexican raw materials (Lewis 25).<sup>37</sup> Anglo-American writing about Mexico in the first decades of the century is characterized by a dialectical attraction and repulsion.<sup>38</sup> Mexican territory is represented as an unexploited paradise of wealth and natural resources, but Mexicans are portrayed pejoratively: as indolent, promiscuous, unintelligent, undeserving of such wealth (Alarcón 5). Mexico is "the land of contrasts," "the land of enchantment," "timeless" and "marvellous," but it is also "savage," "backwards," and "barbarous," a "land of death," an "infernal paradise." Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, "backwards" Mexico served as a foil to the progress of America and the growth of British empire. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, it acquired a new significance. Pastoral fables of the "machine in the garden" had driven American industrialization and western expansion (Marx 203). By the fin-de-siècle, American writers were mourning the disappearance of the "distinction between East and West," the transformation of formerly pristine territories into "a man-made wilderness" of technological power, a "garden of ashes" (Marx 358). Mexico offered a new geographical orientation—south to America's north—and a

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<sup>35</sup> Veracruz was the first tropical rainforest in the world to experience oil extraction, and suffered severe ecological damage as a result, including falls of "black rain" caused by oil spillage: "Foreign oil extraction, which began in 1900 and lasted until 1938, drastically altered both the ecological and social make-up of the region. Domination of the area by American and European oil companies transformed land tenure patterns, land use, social composition and social structures" (Santiago 61-101).

<sup>36</sup> By 1911, over 8 million barrels of oil were produced in Mexico, by 1921, 193 million barrels, making Mexico the second largest oil producer (Haber 18).

<sup>37</sup> Mexico was the third largest source of British investment after Argentina and Brazil (Lewis 25).

<sup>38</sup> This dynamic continues in later Anglo-American writing about the Mexico, "the obverse of the United States" (Veitch 8). In his 1978 preface to Douglas Veitch's study of British writers in Mexico, George Woodcock writes, "The author has himself travelled to Mexico in order to see and experience the extraordinary terrain, and, as I can vouch on the basis of my own knowledge of that infinitely attractive and repellent country, he used his senses well while he was there" (Veitch xiv), thus ironically perpetuating the myth formed by Anglo-American travel writers.



source of new “raw landscapes” to feed fantasies of technological progress and savage nature.

Thus, Charles Reginald Enock’s *Mexico* (1909) deplores Mexico’s uncultivated “wastes” but casts the Mexican landscape as a gold-land inviting conquest: “Both Mexico and Peru ever lured me on as seeming to hold for me some El Dorado, and if I have not reaped gold as the Conquistadores did, there are nevertheless other matters of satisfaction accruing to the traveller from his journeys in those splendid territories of mountain and forest” (vii). A civil and mining engineer sent to survey Mexico’s topography, natural, resources, and industries for investors in Detroit, Enock continually aligns his project to revitalize Mexico’s mines with the civilizing conquest of the Spanish conquistadors: “It must not be forgotten that to the efforts of the men of Spain the science of mining owes much. And, indeed, these remote waste places of the earth owe the civilisation they possess to the early work of these Conquistadores” (257). The Black Legend in which the Spanish “laid waste” to Mexico, is therefore transformed into a myth by which the Americans, the new conquistadors, will *redeem* Mexico’s wastes. Humboldt’s earlier rhetoric of a peaceful “conquest by cultivation” is elaborated into a vision of “capital conquest.”

W.E. Carson’s *The Wonderland of the South* (1909) enshrines Mexico’s paradisaical landscapes, romantic customs, and “wonderfully strange contrasts” in a cult of the “picturesque” (v). Mexico is “a land of wonders” because of its “marvelous richness,” “mineral wealth of amazing extent,” and topographical variety “possessing every range of climate, and soils of capable of producing every variety of fruit, vegetable and flower” (89). Yet this “tempting land for businessman” (90) remains fallow: “if Americans only realized the opportunities Mexico affords” (91). His narrative ranks and catalogues Mexico’s urban centres and regions according to their physical beauty and economic productivity, praising “the silver city” of Guanajato, “Guadalajara the wonderful,” Cuernavaca the “Mexican paradise” of colonial culture, Oaxaca whose “vast wealth still lies hidden” (177). However he is obsessed with the uncleanness and indolence of the “dirty peons” who interrupt this picturesque: “It is pitiful to think of such a wonderland remaining in the hands of the shiftless Indians” (182). On his tour of

interviews with overseers, hacendados, and mining foreman, he cannot bear to witness any evidence of extreme exploitation which would disturb his vision of “luxurious life at a gold-mine.” Thus Thompson demonizes “the Indian,” implying he should be “cleansed” from the land: “Even if his contentment and his preference for the simple life are suggestive of a latter-day Arcady, he is undoubtedly an obstacle to progress and to the best interest of his lovely land” (183). He concludes by imagining Mexico “surely awakening into new life through the oncoming host of American invaders” (325).

However, after the 1910 Revolution, the Manichean construction of Mexico as a “barbarous wonderland” is radically transformed. The revolution polarizes writers into pro- or anti-Mexican bias, and the travel account metamorphoses into political commentary. For the “traveling theater troupe” (Buchenau 5) of travel writers, academics, journalists, progressive and left-wing political pilgrims who descended on Mexico, the discourse of barbarity is recalibrated to express a critique of social injustices and the “lazy native” myth is turned upside down. John Kenneth Turner’s *Barbarous Mexico* (1911), which has been called the “Uncle Tom’s Cabin of Mexico,” inaugurates three decades of political journalism seeking to “redress the imperialist injustices of the past” and to monitor Mexico’s revolutionary experiments in social justice and economic progress (Buchenau 5).

Observing the conditions in which Africans, Chinese, and Indians labour in plantations and mines, Turner builds a devastating picture of chattel-slavery, wage-slavery, and peonage. His rhetoric is remarkably restrained, and he does not resort to talk of hell, or depravity, only of “slave-holes” and the barbarity of the state: “Under the present barbarous government there is no hope for reform in Mexico except through armed revolution” (294). His searing indictment of the *Porfiriato* spares no mercy for the Yankee investors complicit with the corrupt social and economic institutions of Diaz’s regime.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup>At the conclusion, he criticizes the American government’s desire to intervene in the coming revolution and uphold Diaz’s regime merely because it is beneficial to American economic interests: “if the American army crosses [into Mexico] it will not be ostensibly to protect Diaz, but to protect American property and American lives” (295). He urges Americans to speak out against neo-imperialism: “There is one thing that is practical and necessary, especially for Americans, and that is to insist that there shall be *no foreign intervention for the purpose of maintaining the slavery*” (294).



Americans commonly characterize Mexico as “our Sister Republic”...a benevolent paternalism. [...] I found Mexico to be a land where the people are poor because they have no rights, where peonage is the rule for the great mass, and where actual chattel slavery obtains for hundreds of thousands. (3-4)

Conservative Mexicans and Yankees viewed his book as insidious propaganda and Diaz authorities tried to prevent its circulation. However, socialist and labour reviews were favourable in the US and in England, where the *Labour Leader*, in an article entitled “The Henequen Hells of Mexico” praised Turner as “an American humanitarian who deserves the thanks of civilization” (cited in Turner xix). In the language of reform, Mexico is an infernal paradise not because it is unexploited, but precisely because it is.

However, in the literature of “peaceful conquest,” the myth of the “lazy native” intensifies after the revolution, highlighting a “pathological Mexican culture,” a “Mexican Problem” which Americans must resolve if planned paradise is to succeed (Gonzalez 1). Wallace Thompson’s unabashedly racist *The People of Mexico* (1921) offers a psychological anatomy of “one of the grievously sick nations in the world” (xi), where the “prehistoric Indian civilization [is] trying to destroy European civilization” (7). The diseased nation is unable to fulfil its reputation of “treasure house”:

Mexico lies in the midst of the Americas, a great cornucopia, but the riches and the fruits hidden therein do not pour with the prodigality of legend. [...] For four hundred years Mexico has stood in the vocabularies of those who have talked of her as a horn of plenty, a land lavish beyond dreams, but she has yet to record the real pouring forth of any gargantuan riches. (131)

Responding to Mexican anthropologist José Vasconcelos’ mythologization of the *mestizo* in *La raza cósmica* (1925), Thompson declares that the weak “half-brother” has failed to beat back the “great, dark sea of the unthinking Indian” (33) and that “unless the white world again takes up the burden, Mexico must

inevitably slip back to the plane of pre-Spanish barbarism" (12).<sup>40</sup> Thompson's account is one of the most powerful codifications of the anthropological myth of the incontinent Indian whose "gambling, drunkenness and sexual overindulgence" ruins gold-land: "The philosopher's stone which through all history had transmuted the dross of barbarism into the gold of civilization is self-control" (371). The only solution to such barbarity is for white Americans to drag "backwards" Mexico into the "world of to-day" (407): "Her resources, her gold and silver and oil, her henequen and rubber and coffee and lumber, her great labour supplies that wait so surely upon education and uplift, are forces which the white world cannot ignore anymore—save to turn them over to the yellow" (407). Thompson justifies American neo-imperial endeavour in Mexico in the wider context of global white supremacy and anxiety about the "Yellow Peril."

With the rise of American influence in Mexico, British discourse shifted from viewing Mexico as a site of potential investment to one of lost opportunity. Rivalry between English and American imperialisms for ancient goods produced "enmity as well as emulation" (Aguirre 86). From the 1920s, British traveller-writers flocked to Mexico, alternating between the longing to find regeneration in a paradise of the primitive, and the compulsion to represent post-Revolutionary Mexico as a fallen world mirroring imperial decline: "Mexico—with its fabled history, its subtropical volcanic landscape, its millions of Indian peasants, its reputation for sporadic violence, and its cult of death—was a veritable treasure of the exotic" (Walker 2). D.H. Lawrence, Graham Greene, Evelyn Waugh, and Aldous Huxley all sought a death-suffused religious exotic in the Mexican landscape: Greene's "Indian religion—a dark, tormented, magic cult" ("Lawless" 171), Lawrence's fabricated religion of Quetzacoatl, Huxley's mescaline hallucinations of heaven and hell, Waugh's "stalking" of "barbarism" ("When" 8). To the extent that the 20<sup>th</sup>-century search for the religious exotic in Mexico metaphorically re-enacts the literal search for El Dorado, it carries its own burden of submerged guilt.

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<sup>40</sup> Refuting Vasconcelos' notion of "aesthetic" racial assimilation which will create a "fifth cosmic race" in Latin America to replace decaying Europe as world leaders, Thompson asks: "Must we not rather seek some other means than racial amalgamation, some more direct and definite system of white domination, founded deeply in white superiority and the white world's vital need of control of Mexico and her resources in the coming struggle for the shores of the Pacific?" (34).



The writers, like the explorers who laid claim to land through the act of passive seeing, take possession of the land by inscribing what they see in words. However, unlike Cortés, who first sighted, then conquered Tenochtitlán, or Columbus, who named and claimed islands, these “watchers of the skies” cannot physically possess the land. For them, the mode of power has shifted from the external to the discursive. Even as they seek to exploit the exotic in Mexico, they are already conscious of their expulsion from paradise: the Mexican Revolution and the encroachment of American capital threaten to cut off the option of informal, economic imperialism. This precipitates an intensification of the infernal signs which mark the tension between the longing for a way of possessing paradise “without subjugation and violence” and the “assumed guilt of conquest” which the observer “eternally tries to escape, and eternally invokes” (Pratt 57). In the literature of informal empire and its loss, the paradoxical blankness and productivity of the land are injected with a sense of fatality and threat. The emptiness becomes the barrenness of the wasteland, the variety of the landscape becomes malign and alien; the paradise becomes an anti-paradise, signalling both desire and disappointment. The anti-paradise diverges from the anti-conquest in that it signposts the suppressed guilt of the (post)colonial writer through the sign of the damned, rather than the façade of innocence.

The guilt of the European is embodied in the Indian, ancient, barbaric, a repository of extinguished culture, a figure of abjection and violence. A dynamic of racist, fear-suffused fascination surrounds the representation of Amerindians in British writing, emerging in the chilling sacrifice of the European woman in Lawrence’s “The Woman Who Rode Away,” in the “hundred, villainous, coffee-coloured peons, staring up...with beady tortoise’s eyes” (574) in Aldous Huxley’s *Eyeless in Gaza*, in the “black secret Indian eyes” in Greene’s *The Power and the Glory* (19). “Everything is repeated,” writes Greene, “even the blood sacrifices of the Aztecs; the age of Mexico falls on the spirit like a cloud” (“Lawless” 44). The Mexican Revolution’s deliberate evocation of myths of paradise lost and regained to deplore the dispossession of the Indians and exhort the “‘re-conquest’ of the homeland” by their descendants (Walker 4) enhances the European fear that if the Indians were to “regain” paradise, it would be through bloody revenge:

Foreign writers were unable to indulge in the Mexican dream with its being transformed in their eyes...into nightmare. [...] At the heart of that nightmare lay...the latent assumption...that the volcanic earth of Mexico, its ancient thirst merely tantalized by the recent carnage of the Revolution, cries out for more blood to compensate the wrongs done its children. (Walker 15)

The modern-day Mexican-Indian, deracinated descendant of the Aztec, haunts the European imaginary as a reminder of their status as “modern counterparts of his conquerors” (Walker 15).

Jedy Esty argues that most of the British writers of the 1930s-1960s “typically associated with the ebb of British power—Graham Greene, Malcolm Lowry, Evelyn Waugh, George Orwell, Philip Larkin, even to some extent W.H. Auden and the critic F.R. Leavis” are obsessed with the representation of “burnt-out ends” of empire because they “take imperial decline to imply national decline” (215). Hence, Waugh writes that “all that seeming-solid, patiently built, gorgeously ornamented structure of Western life was to melt overnight like an ice-castle” (Waugh “When” 8). For Greene, the “last of the colonial writers,” the compulsion to visit the “burnt-out ends” of empire—from Mexico, to Africa, to Indo-China—becomes an inverted pilgrimage: “What remains in Greene’s works is an alternate form of the colonial novel, with an emphasis on the horrible aspects of the setting...Religion fills the gap left by the absence of the usual subject matter” (Meyers 98-9). Pratt observes that the rhetoric of triviality, dehumanization and rejection in late 20<sup>th</sup>-century travel writing coincides with the end of colonial rule in Africa and Asia, the rise of national liberation movements, and accelerated processes of modernization, industrialization and urbanization (220). Instead of “cornucopias of resources inviting the artful, perfecting intervention of the West,” the former colonial landscapes are represented as “conglomerations of incongruities, asymmetries, perversions, absence and emptiness” (Pratt 220).

In the case of Mexico, this rhetorical shift occurs earlier, a harbinger of the break-up of empire to come and the endangerment of the new strategies which British capital has developed to colonize Mexico in the absence of formal empire. Paul



Fussell writes, “Mexico somehow makes Anglo-Saxon authors go all to pieces,” (159) and Jeremy Treglown echoes, “Somehow the nearer a writer gets to Mexico the more likely he is to be affected by the literary-perception scrambler” (91). This “infernalization” of the travel memoir is a product neither of metaphysical qualities latent in Mexico’s landscape nor of the fact that “the British experience of empire...does not apply” in Mexico (Veitch 3), but rather of Mexico’s early independence, revolution, and nationalization of resources, which challenges not only English national power, but European global authority over the economies and peoples it strives to hold in subjugation.<sup>41</sup> To restore the “sickly body” of Western civilization, Lawrence seeks the primitive, Lowry imagines a Romantic encounter with restorative Nature, Greene hunts “seediness,” primal stuff.<sup>42</sup> Yet as they displace their anxieties onto Mexico’s depraved Eden, their “ambivalence is as likely to cause [them] to want to exploit or even destroy the world as to reconstruct it” (Capps 95).

British writing about Mexico in the 1930s replaces the trope of empty abundance with the waste land, the “spectacle of nada” (Fussell 159). In Huxley’s novel *Eyeless in Gaza* (1936), Anthony Beavis prepares to leave for Mexico to aid the revolutionary supporters of the Spanish Civil War, and fantasizes his trip to Mexico as “projected flight into the exotic” equivalent to Eastern paradises: “In imagination he sailed from island to island in the Aegean; smoked hashish in the slums of Cairo, ate bhang in Benares; did a slight Joseph Conrad in the East Indies...a slight Gauguin in the South Seas” (458). When he arrives, he is rejected by the Mexican revolutionaries, and his image of paradise reverts to waste land:

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<sup>41</sup> The Mexican anti-paradise reflects the dialectical relationship between late modernism and declining colonialism, where “the passions and values of the individual subject reveal themselves as essentially dependent upon trans-individual institutions” (Jameson cited in Bongie 46).

<sup>42</sup> Empire is diseased, yet not extinct as a “redeeming” idea: Lowry describes himself as “afflicted with Mexico” (Walker 281); Greene describes Mexico as “something I couldn’t shake off, like a state of mind” (“Lawless” 148). Robert Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621) famously illustrates the desire to construct new Edens/empires in response to an ailing nation: “Society must needs be discontent, melancholy, hath a sickly body, and had need to be reformed. [In order to] to satisfy and please myself [I] make an Utopia of my own, a new Atlantis, a poetical Commonwealth of mine own, in which I will freely domineer” (Fenn 336). Both Lowry and Greene mention reading *Anatomy of Melancholy* during their travels. In *The Lawless Roads*, Greene explains that he took the book to West Africa because he thought it would be consonant with his experience—it “matched the mood all right,” but made him more depressed, therefore, in Mexico, he reads Trollope instead, but still recalls Burton (“Lawless” 128).

There was no shade, and the vast bald hills were the colour of dust and burnt grass. Nothing stirred, not even a lizard. There was no sight or sound of life. Hopelessly empty, the chaos of tumbled mountains seemed to stretch away interminably. It was as though they had ridden across the frontier of the world out into nothingness, into an infinite expanse of hot and dusty negation. (526)

Similarly, in Waugh's *Robbery under Law*, Mexico has a "lunar character": "It is waste land, part of a dead, or at any rate, a dying planet. Politics, everywhere destructive, have here dried up the place, frozen it, cracked it, and powdered it dust" (7). For Greene, Eliot's waste land extends beyond the boundaries of metropolitan London into all the dark places of the earth blackened, not illumined, by empire.<sup>43</sup>

The discourse of "negation, domination, devaluation and fear" (Pratt 219) shaping these writers' consciousness of Mexican people and places is inflected by their differing politics. In Lawrence's "The Woman Who Rode Away" (1928), Mexico's pink hills are "void as only the undiscovered is void," like the protagonist (47). It is from her husband's crude materialism, which reduces her to a sterile void, a mine to be possessed, that she flees into the unknown in search of "vulgar marvel," and is finally consummated in phallic sacrifice to the Indians' sun-god (49). The story is haunted by images of death and bankruptcy in relation to the "dead market" of silver. It opens by describing the silver-works in the midst of "lifeless isolation," "a dead, thrice-deal little Spanish town," "deadness within deadness" (45-6). Informal imperialism has failed to possess paradise, has only exported the mechanized state of western civilization, and reduced its practitioners to dead men, hollow women. For Lawrence, Mexico is barren because it has been emptied out by foreign capital, its true "primitive" riches unfathomed.

Waugh's *Robbery under Law* (1939) is similarly haunted by the death of a market and by the perception of a diseased West: "Is civilization, like a leper, beginning to rot as its extremities?"(3). Mexico is the rotting extremity, but the disease is not

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<sup>43</sup> For a discussion of how Greene utilizes imagery from Eliot's "The Waste Land" in *The Power and the Glory* and his other novels, see Fred D. Crawford's chapter, "Graham Greene: Heaps of Broken Images" in *Mixing Memory and Desire* (1982).



materialism, as it was for Lawrence, but rather socialism. In 1939, General Cardenas confiscated the properties of a dozen or more oil companies representing British, Dutch, American and other foreign shareholders, valued at more than £80 million, an act celebrated by socialists around the world. Waugh's trip was financed by Clive Pearson, a British businessman whose oil and railway holdings in Mexico had been expropriated (Fussell 222), and his travel narrative is a polemical screed expressing rage at the nationalization of Britain's black gold-lands by the USA's "dangerous little neighbour" (5): "A rich and essential British industry was openly stolen in time of peace" (3). He sees Mexico as an anarchic hell attracting misguided ideologues: "These credulous pilgrims pursue their quest for the promised land; constantly disappointed, never disillusioned" (11).

The shadow of the "petroleum dispute" also overhangs Greene's *The Lawless Roads* (1939): "The atmosphere of hostility thickened—and directed itself against me...I was suffering for the ancient wrong-doing of the oil pioneers" (178). For Greene, Mexico, like Morelos, "once one of the richest states of Mexico, which was left barren by Zapata's useless riding" (209), has been wholly emptied of beauty and value by the revolution. It is spiritually and politically damned, a man-made political hell, "a godless state" (112), "a very evil land" (114), "a hateful and hating country" (128). He de-exoticizes the "picturesque" tropes of "blithe American guidebooks" such as *Frances Toor's Guide to Mexico* (1934): Mexico's fertility becomes "horrifying abundance," its tropical birds become "hideous vultures" with "tiny moron heads" (124), its attractiveness becomes "wounded beauty" (201), its traditional markets and folkways are "more squalid than anything I had ever seen in the West African bush" (44).<sup>44</sup> Greene had developed a romantic conception of Mexico as a child from reading Haggard's *Montezuma's Daughter*, and he describes his arrival at Las Casas as "like an adventure of Rider Haggard, coming so unexpectedly out of the forest above this city" (171). Yet Las Casas is "rotten" (172) and the only glimmer of gold-land is in the sun: "Only sunset cast some kind of gentle humanizing spell over this rocky cactus

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<sup>44</sup> Green remarks sardonically, "I suppose if you live long enough in Mexico you begin to write like Miss Frances Toor" (35-6).

desolation—a faint gold, a subjective pity, as if one were looking at the world for a moment through a god’s anatomical and pitying eye” (42).

Although Greene excoriates the persecution of priests in Chiapas, it is the land’s valuelessness and unexploitableness which most disturbs him: “The Romantics would have enjoyed the Mexican scene, describing it as ‘sublime’ and ‘awe-inspiring’...But Nature appals me when unemployed or unemployable” (61). In “this barren picturesque strange land” (62), Europeans are either unwelcome, or in danger of “absorption” like the Mexican Greenes he meets; unlike West Africa, it is no longer a colony, it has the ability to expel foreigners and foreign capital. In *The Power and the Glory*, the neurotic Englishwoman Mrs. Fellowes is terrified of being killed in the land where her husband insists on remaining even after the expropriation of British properties and the departure of the British consul: “The real thing was taboo—death coming near every year in the strange place: everybody packing up and leaving, while she stayed in a cemetery no one visited, in a big above-ground tomb” (33). Greene’s Mexican “anti-aesthetic” is thus the most powerful expression of the discourse of negation and devaluation provoked by the devaluing of Britain’s former properties, by the collapse of the fantasy of gold-land or paradise. In the next chapter, I will explore how Malcolm Lowry builds on the traditions of Anglo-American writing and Mexican national ideology to mount a critique of global imperialism through his use of a Mexican “anti-paradise.”



## Chapter 2

### “Perverse Paradiso”: Malcolm Lowry, Wilson Harris, and Modern Mexico

“Mexico is heavenly and undoubtedly hellish, Malcolm Lowry once said. Under the volcano that so fascinated that English writer, we should add, there exists a strange territory which separates heaven from hell. [...] Heaven is just up there; one can see it and dream about it. Up there are the fruits of the Mexican Revolution, the heroes of the fatherland, the nationalized nation, the *ejidos* of the agrarian reform, population culture, the expropriation of foreign oil companies, social security, rescued indigenous traditions, the murals of Diego Rivera... Down here, we daily suffer the inclemencies of a hell of despotism and authoritarianism, of corruption and social misery, of repression and violence, of an old revolution institutionalized by political bureaucracy and hemmed in by monopolies and bankers. In between rises up the all-powerful sixty-year-old state, balancing tensions and pacifying conflicts.”

- Roger Bartra, *Blood, Ink and Culture* (2002)

The political history of modern Mexico is inextricable from the competing struggles of land reform and economic progress. Before the 1910 Revolution, Mexico's elite ruling class monopolized the land. Revolutionaries such as Emilio Zapata demanded the break-up of the haciendas and the return of agricultural lands to peasant communities. The Constitution of 1917 proclaimed the nation's sovereign right over all land, restoring the legal sanction to communal property. However, between 1911-1934, the reforms undertaken by the post-revolutionary governments were limited to the abolition of parasitic landlordism. The dismantling and redistribution of land from the great estates was seen as only an interim step towards a modern capitalist future, in which modern agro-industries and private farms would eventually replace *ejidos*, the state properties associated with land reform.<sup>1</sup> Under Venustiano Carranza, the haciendas simply changed hands. In 1929, Plutarco Elías Calles founded the National Revolutionary Party

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<sup>1</sup> *Ejidos* were lands reserved for common use of the indigenous population during colonial times. During the land reforms following the Mexican Revolution (1910-17), in Indian areas land was collectively owned by the community as *ejidos* and periodically parcelled out among its members.

(PRN), a coalition of generals and politicians who halted reforms and nationalization in order to prioritize North American foreign capital. In 1930, Calles cancelled land redistribution completely, arguing that the peasants were idle, uneducated and lacked the capacity to cultivate the *ejidos*. However, this resulted in an upsurge of nationalist sentiments, and when General Lázaro Cárdenas became president in 1934, he initiated the single largest agrarian reform in Mexico's history.

Under Cárdenas' "Golden Age," 40 million acres were distributed to peasants in five years (Dumont 51).<sup>2</sup> Capitalizing on popular nationalist sentiment, Cárdenas changed the party's name to Party of the Mexican Revolution (PRM), adopted the slogan "for a workers' democracy," and launched an ambitious program of Mexicanization expropriating Anglo-American oilfields and railways.<sup>3</sup> Yet, when Cárdenas' mandate ended in 1940, the Mexican state renewed its links with American investors and launched a counter-reform. In 1946, the Party of the Mexican Revolution officially became the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) replacing Cardenas' slogan with the less revolutionary "democracy and social justice." While promoting myths of its revolutionary origins, the PRI continually sabotaged land reform in favor of capital and foreign investment. The economic growth which Mexico experienced in the next four decades, known as *El Milagro Mexicano*, the "Mexican Miracle," was characterized by severe social inequality and political oppression. Between the 1940s-1970s, *ejidatarios* were deprived of state financial aid in the form of credit, water resources, transportation and marketing advantages, and technical assistance, while the private sector received state subsidies to produce prosperous cash crops (Dumont 52). Under *neolatifundismo*, capitalist entrepreneurs were permitted to invade existing *ejidos* and rent them out, thus creating large-scale enterprises reaping the benefits of land

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<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the plots of land which were distributed were two-and-a-half times bigger. Most of this land was given to town communities as communal *ejidos*.

<sup>3</sup> His regime relied on the mobilization of the peasants and working-classes, but limited their potential for resistance by organizing them into groups whose leaders were loyal to or dependent on the government. During his residence in Mexico City, Leon Trotsky observed that Cárdenas' expropriation of oil and redistribution of land was neither socialism nor communism, rather an anti-colonial, nationalist act designed to appease the peasants and stabilize the market: "The national bourgeoisie needs an inner [domestic] market and the inner market is a more or less satisfied peasantry. That is why the agrarian revolution, especially at the expense of foreign owners, is a direct gain to the national bourgeoisie. The peasants will buy more goods and so on. This policy is of a political character" ("Mexico" 3).



no longer sowed by the peasants to whom it was assigned. Meanwhile, the PRI insisted that land reform had been completed and no land was left to distribute.<sup>4</sup>

In 1965, the government introduced the Border Industrialization Program (BIP), legalizing the duty-free import of raw materials manufactured or assembled in *maquiladora* export-factories,<sup>5</sup> and spawning the industrialization of the Mexican-US border regions by foreign investors. At the same time, development-minded state officials selected tourism as a “export-push industry,” actively seeking to “export paradise” to the US market (Clancy 1). They developed specific strategies to transform Mexico from a source of seedy “border pleasures” and traditional culture, “*lo Mexicano*,” into a “sun, sea and sands” destination (Clancy 49). From a “nearly deserted barrier island,” Cancún was deliberately and successfully developed to attract US tourists to the relatively unvisited “Mexican Caribbean” (Clancy 53). Similarly, the state made a concerted effort to transform Mexico’s interior from “tropical inferno” into “paradise resort.” During the Revolution, most haciendas had been burned to the ground, but now, as in Caribbean, former sugar plantations were restored as luxury hotels attracting tourists to resort towns like Cuernavaca. In proportion to this process of economic modernization, the “Creole Leviathan” of the PRI became increasingly authoritarian and repressive. In the Tlatelolco Massacre of 1968, 250 students and workers protesting outside the National Autonomous University—*No queremos olimpiadas, queremos revolución!* “We don’t want the Olympics, we want revolution!”—were killed by Díaz Ordaz’s security forces in an attempt to crush the student movement.

In 1972, Luis Echeverría, prompted by major deficits in basic food production and escalating peasant resistance, embarked on the biggest land reform program since Cárdenas. He legalized land invasions of foreign-owned capitalist farms and

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<sup>4</sup> However, during this same period, peasant resistance to capitalist expansion intensified. They denounced the private landholdings held by PRI politicians which exceeded the maximum legally permissible size, organized local struggles against caciques and large cattle-ranchers, colonized areas in the tropical lowlands, and invaded illegally large landholdings throughout the country.

<sup>5</sup> Maquiladoras are corporations operating under maquila programs approved by the Mexican Secretariat of Commerce and Industrial Development (SECOFI). They are entitled to foreign investment capital and management of up to 100% and to duty-free import of machinery, equipment, parts and materials. Maquiladoras export the sum total of their products, mostly to the US. The factories produce electronic equipment, clothing, plastics, furniture, appliances, and auto parts through part-assembly and manufacture; however, production can also consist of non-industrial operations such as data-processing, packaging, and sorting.



ranches and revitalized the state credit system. However, peasants lacking capital were restricted to sowing low-value crops, while the capitalist sector continued to produce high-profit crops. Echeverría's reforms effectively reduced peasants to dependence on state subsidies, and failed to satisfy the demand for new land. In the next administration, José López Portillo brutally repressed land invasions and remained biased towards the private sector. After 1982, the introduction of neo-liberal policies caused the rapid deterioration of the agricultural and peasant sector, but sparked an explosion of foreign-owned *maquiladoras*, creating increased labour migration and heightened environmental degradation (Sadowski-Smith 717).<sup>6</sup> In December 1991, the neo-liberal administration of President Carlos Salinas de Gortari amended Constitutional Article 27 to legalize sales of *ejido* land, allow peasants to rent their land to capitalist entrepreneurs as loan-collateral, and cut off the possibility of future redistribution of private land.<sup>7</sup> In 1994, The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) eliminated tariffs and labour and environmental protections which infringed on corporations' abilities to make a profit, triggering a further expansion of the maquiladora industry out of border towns into every Mexican state.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, Mexico's tourist industry continued to accelerate, becoming the largest in Latin America, attracting a deluge of North American tourists to luxury hotels serviced by poor Mexican workers. In the historic 2000 elections, the PRI lost the presidential election for the first time in 71 years, to Vicente Fox of the opposition National Action Party (PAN). While the change to a reactionary party seemed dramatic, it revealed the true orientation of Mexican politics, exchanging the revolutionary myths of the PRI for the unveiled conservatism of the PAN.

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<sup>6</sup> Labourers in the maquiladoras suffer abject working conditions including low pay, sexual exploitation of women, and illnesses caused by exposure to toxic waste and industrial solvents (Sadowski-Smith 726).

<sup>7</sup> Since the continuity of agrarian struggles in Mexico from the revolution onwards has been sustained by laws legalizing the redistribution of large private holdings, these changes represent a radical break with the revolutionary past. However, neoliberal attempts to restructure the rural economy have been met with a number of militant responses, including the movement led by Subcomandante Marcos, the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN) in Chiapas, and the Barzonista ("El Barzón") movement, a national debtors' organization supporting urban small businessmen and farmers unable to pay their loans to banks.

<sup>8</sup> However, in the last decade, US corporations have increasingly relocated factories to Asia, particularly China, which offers even cheaper labour costs, no benefits and abject working conditions acceptable to local governments.



## Paradise Subverted: The Construction of Mexican National Identity

“The country has been hyperconscious of its backward condition for at least 150 years. Today Mexico is routinely labelled a ‘developing nation’. Because it is allegedly not yet developed, it is not in a position to speak for humanity at large.”

- Claudio Lomnitz, *Deep Mexico, Silent Mexico* (2001)

The polarization and social asymmetries which have characterized Mexico’s transition from an economy of haciendas and silver-mines to maquiladoras and plantation hotels are reflected in the contradictions of Mexican national consciousness. Between 1810-29, when Spanish-American nationalism gathered force, the dynamics of independent postcolonial statehood in Mexico produced “deep ideological changes in who was considered a national, and who a foreigner” and a redefinition of the relationship between race and nation (Lomnitz 26). The Mexican elite and middle classes forged an essentialist discourse that “subsumed a wealth of cultural difference under single categories such as ‘Mexican’ or ‘Indian’” (Buchenau 3). Mexico’s geographical expanse, diversity of peoples and topographies, lack of economic integration, and attractiveness of resources to foreign powers “all conspired to make nationality a desired achievement more than a well-established fact” (Lomnitz xiv). In order to consolidate the fragile national identity, Mexico developed one of the world’s earliest national anthropologies. In its first stage (1850-1900), it drew upon the Occidentalist discourse of foreign scientific travelers such as Humboldt to produce a national image; in its second (1880-1920), it adopted evolutionary paradigms to create a program for the control and assimilation of the “backward population” of Indians (Lomnitz 230). Influenced by a double-layer of Spanish colonial and 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Anglo-American imperialist depictions, early Mexican social scientists and writers circled obsessively around the “Great National Problem” of Mexico’s alleged irrationality. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Mexicans were alleged to be irrational because *mestizos* and Indians were racially inferior. By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the discourse of scientific racism was abandoned, but Mexicans were still portrayed as fatalists blinded by superstition (Lomnitz xvii-xviii). “Barbaric” Mexico was imagined as a fallen world in comparison to the idyllic pre-

Columbian world, where the Aztecs had ruled in might and power, unlike their degraded descendants. The experience of uneven modernity further reinforced nostalgic myths of pre-modern paradise lost.<sup>9</sup>

However, after the revolution, the paradise myth metamorphosed again in response to the consolidation of the state. The construction of post-Revolutionary Mexican national identity underwent two booms, first during the years 1928-1931, when a group of writers emerged from the journal *Contemporaneós*, and again in the 1950s, with the publication of studies of Mexicanness such as Octavio Paz's *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (1947). The "national character" invented by these writers was quickly improvised, a costume "patched together" in response to the pressure of the "nationalist carnival" (Bartra "Cage" 4). Mexican national consciousness was constructed within the larger Western tradition, drawing on Spanish and Anglo-American imaginaries, and recycling as popular national culture the myths generated by elite cultural forms such as literature. According to Roger Bartra, writers constructed the myth of post-Revolutionary Mexico as a "subverted paradise" traumatized by the failure of revolution and reacting with melancholy to modern progress. This myth imposes a cohesive identity and order on a society convulsed by the ruptures of capitalist industrial modernity while giving vent to its guilt and nostalgia. Furthermore, it is anti-utopian, functioning to delimitate the nation-state, stabilize the hegemony of the PRI, and suppress democratic or socialist resistance "through opposition to a Utopia intending to revolutionize (or contaminate) it" (Bartra "Cage" 18). Its archetypes are bound up in the construction of class and racial Others, revolving particularly around figures of disenfranchised Indians and poor peasants, which serve to control and repress the underprivileged while empowering the state and its elite. Largely from the middle classes, writers and intellectuals worked anxiously to secure their place

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<sup>9</sup> Marshall Berman observes that the onslaught of capitalist modernity, in which "all that is solid melts into air" is apt to engender "numerous nostalgic myths of pre-modern Paradise Lost" in those who experience it, as a well as a sensation of feeling that "they are the first ones, and maybe the only ones to be going through it" even though ever-increasing numbers have been experiencing technological and economic modernization and over/underdevelopment since at least the 15<sup>th</sup> century (15).



within the nation-state against the popular revolutionary uprisings which had previously threatened to uproot them (Doremus 23).<sup>10</sup>

The first wave of cultural nationalists in the 1920s envisioned art as a pedagogical and aesthetic tool to educate the poor and assimilate disenfranchised Indians into national life (Doremus 18). José Vasconcelos, Secretary of Public Education during the rule of Álvaro Obregón (1920-24) promoted a Mexican cultural renaissance by financing artists and writers who shared his messianic vision of art. He provided the muralists Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros and José Clemente Orozco with materials, public buildings as canvases, and state-approved themes: revolution, agrarian reform, Yankee imperialism, and indigenous culture (Doremus 19). Like Rivera's epic mural at the National Palace, the cultural nationalists glorified the country's Aztec heritage as "authentic" Mexicanness, exalting the indigenous as a key component of Mexican *mestizo* identity. Vasconcelos' *The Cosmic Race* (1929) was crucial to the formation of the new discourse of *mestizaje* which sought to define Mexicanness in opposition to earlier colonial discourses of *criollo* identity and Western discourses of European superiority. Arguing against the theories of ethnic cleansing promoted by Aryan eugenicists, Vasconcelos favours a radical miscegenation, in which darker races would be "lightened" by their assimilation into a "cosmic," "synthetical race":

The lower types of the species will be absorbed by the superior type...The Indian, by grafting onto the related race, would take the jump of millions years that separate Atlantis from our times, in a few decades of aesthetic eugenics, the Black may disappear ...In this manner, a selection of taste would take effect, much more efficient than the brutal Darwinist selection.

(32)

In exalting the *mestizo* as the super-human representative of a new Atlantean race whose "transcendental mission" is to possess the "promised land" after "conquest of the Tropics" (24), Vasconcelos merely recalibrates racial stereotypes. The white is still the "moral and material basis for the union of all men into a fifth universal race" (9), the Indian, Chinese and black peoples of Mexico are not to be

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<sup>10</sup> Those who failed to construct national consciousness in consonance with state-sponsored ideologies or who expressed dissent against the PRI were suppressed, like Marxist writer José Revueltas who was repeatedly jailed and tortured after he opposed the state (Doremus 24).

recognized, but erased, their flaws “ameliorated” (9), Mexico is not to be Indianized, rather the Indian is to be Mexicanized (Doremus 58).<sup>11</sup>

During the Maximato (1929-1935), writers reacted against the muralists’ idealization of the indigenous past and the mestizo future. *Indigenist* novels such as Mauricio Magdaleno’s *El resplendor* (1937) and Gregorio López y Fuentes’ *El Indio* (1935) forge archetypes of the barbaric revolutionary, whose violence, ignorance and immorality reflect that of the masses, and of the alienated Indian degraded by his long history of exploitation. These novels lament the failure of the revolution to eradicate class and racial distinctions, yet perpetrate their own by emphasizing the myth of the Indian as a savage, apathetic, alcoholic, fatalist Other whose biological and spiritual inferiority must be cured so he can integrate into Mexican society and cease posing a violent threat towards mestizo and white Mexicans (Doremus 57). The mestizo is no better—exploitative, greedy, corrupt, ignorant, abusive, and insensitive to the Indian’s suffering, he is not the hero, but rather the depraved symbol of Mexican’s troubled national identity (Doremus 60).

The Contemporaneós movement similarly criticized the cultural nationalists, arguing that Mexican literature should compete with the more “mature” art forms of Europe and the US on the basis of non-ideological universalism. In *Profile of Man and Culture in Mexico* (1951), Samuel Ramos defines this anti-nationalist stance, assuming the role of a psychiatrist diagnosing Mexico’s “inauthenticity.” For Ramos, the nationalists provide Mexicans with cultural “masks” which disguise their insufficiencies. The elite white creoles are the only “genuine” citizens of Mexico, their “elevated consciences” the offshoot of Spanish colonial heritage: “They have reached the highest level to which a Hispanic American can aspire. Their spiritual growth would have been impossible without the nourishment of European culture” (Ramos 76). In contrast, the urban proletariat *pelado* embodies the flaws of the lower classes who maintain the nation in a state of perpetual economic backwardness: “The *pelado* belongs to most vile category of social fauna; he is a form of human rubbish from the great city. He is an animal

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<sup>11</sup> Underscoring the state’s repression of dissent, Vasconcelos himself was driven from Mexico after he dared set himself up as an opposition candidate in the 1929 presidential elections, despite his previous role as a sponsor of the transformation of state ideologies into cultural forms.



whose ferocious pantomimes are designed to terrify others” (58-9). Yet, this invented *pelado* is wholly divorced from any examination of class struggle. Influenced by Ramos’ ideas, Octavio Paz’s eminently more nuanced *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (1947) similarly defines the labyrinth of national identity as a world of masks assumed by solitary Mexicans: the rebellious yet fatalistic *pachuco*, the betrayed and betraying *chingada*, the *mestizo* who allegedly grafts together the contradictions of three cultures (Bartra “Culture” 64).

After the 1940s, indigenism regained momentum, although its central goal remained the incorporation of Indians into the dominant culture, which was called “national” and “modern,” but in practice was “capitalist” and “dependent”: “*indigenismo* [was] an orchid in the hothouse of Mexico’s authoritarian state, co-opted and entirely saturated by its needs and those of foreign capital” (Lomnitz 232).<sup>12</sup> Indian labour in capitalist agro-industries, *maquiladoras*, and luxury tourism was necessary to the nation’s economic growth. Writing promoting racial homogenization and mesticization was aimed less at cultural unity and the elimination of racial discrimination and more at the assimilation of pre-capitalist and non-capitalist systems and the integration of the Indian into the mainstream work-force. It was not until the 1970s that a critique of *indigenismo* as fetishizing a residual Indian identity while excluding contemporary Indians provoked a shift from the anthropology of “Indians” towards the study of social class (Lomnitz 230-1), and not until the late 1990s that Mexican scholars began excavating the Afro-Mexican and Asian-Latino identities subsumed within the homogenizing discourse of *mestizaje* (Romero 114).

Throughout Malcolm Lowry’s *Under the Volcano* (1947), Mexico is described as a fallen paradise: Yvonne exclaims, “My God, this used to be...beautiful...It was like Paradise”; the Consul calls Mexico “the godless garden,” “this paradise of despair.” This deployment of rhetorical tropes and myths of Mexico as a depraved Eden generates a discursive tension with the politics of the material critique embedded in the novel. I have identified three archetypes which inform Lowry’s

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<sup>12</sup> The consolidation of developmental anthropology in conjunction with national identity between 1940s-1960s was formalized in the 1939 creation of the National Institute of Anthropology by Lázaro Cárdenas’ government.

anti-paradise—the *stooping Indian*, the *pelado*, and the *chingadalupe*—which correspond to the myth of “subverted paradise” which Mexican critic Roger Bartra argues serves to legitimate post-Revolutionary national culture in Mexico. These archetypes are so locally specific, despite Lowry’s universalizing use of them, that this raises the question of their origin: to what degree do his mythopoetics prefigure, reflect, or inform those of Mexican writers? The reception and metamorphosis of Lowry’s novel in Mexico and Latin America demands an engagement not yet undertaken by Anglophone critics, since Lowry’s phantasmagoric imagination of Mexico was embraced in the 1950s by Octavio Paz, amongst other writers, and incorporated into the discourses of post-Revolutionary nationalism. Thus, before I explore the political and discursive implications of Lowry’s mythologizing of a Mexican anti-paradise within the complex “imaginary network” of modern cultural myths and political power mapped in Bartra’s *The Cage of Melancholy*, I will begin by evaluating the impact of Lowry’s novel on Latin American intellectuals pursuing the project of writing “Mexicanness.”

### **Black Magic(al) Mexico: The Reception and Reconfiguration of Lowry’s *Bajo el volcán***

“Tlaxcala is probably the only capital in the world where black magic is still a working proposition.”

- Malcolm Lowry, *Sursum Corda!* (1995)

Lowry’s letters reveal little evidence of interaction or collaboration with Mexican intellectuals and do not mention books about Mexican culture other than the tourist handbooks which he parodies in the novel.<sup>13</sup> His failure to socialize with local *intelligentsia* is most likely attributable to the simple fact of his poor Spanish. However, he was certainly familiar with Mexican art, avidly visiting Diego Rivera’s *Palacio de Cortés* murals at Cuernavaca, even incorporating the series portraying the conquest of Tlaxcala into the novel as a symbol of the vengeful anger which the Consul imagines to be emanating from indigenous

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<sup>13</sup> In particular, Lowry mentions reading a *Guide to Mexico*: most likely either Frances Toor’s *Guide to Mexico* (1940) or T. Phillip’s *Terry’s Guide to Mexico* (1930), which Evelyn Waugh and Graham Greene had both consulted before him.



culture in response to betrayers and would-be conquerors.<sup>14</sup> His close friendship with Juan Fernando Marquez, an activist in the *ejidal* land redistribution movement, provided a source of insight into the conflict between the national government and the agrarian reform movements (Thomas 89), while his prodigious drinking in local bars enabled him to absorb Mexican national culture, the cantina being “the forging place of Mexican nationalism” where “drinking cultures” merged with politics (Mitchell 10).<sup>15</sup> As Hama has shown, this awareness of Mexican political culture and sympathy for leftist politics forms a crucial subtext of the novel.

Juan Ortiz’s Spanish translation, *Bajo el volcán*, did not appear until several decades after the US publication; however, the novel was widely read and praised by Latin American intellectuals in the mid-century. The Mexican literary movement of the 1950s-60s known as *La Generación de Medio Siglo* dedicated an issue of their seminal journal, *Revista de la Universidad*, to Malcolm Lowry;<sup>16</sup> Carlos Fuentes established a relation between Lowry’s novel and a mythic Mexican identity: “I consider it one of the best Mexican novels... Lowry is a

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<sup>14</sup>The Consul’s suspicious (mis)reading of the mural attributes malevolence to the emergent indigenous identity celebrated by Rivera and expresses his obsessive fear of expulsion:

The part of the murals he was gazing at portrayed, he knew, the Tlahuicans who had died for this valley in which he lived [...] As he looked it was as if these figures were gathering silently together. Now they had become one figure, one immense, malevolent creature starting back at him. Suddenly this creature appeared to start forward, then make a violent motion. It might have been, indeed unmistakably it was, telling him to go away (UTV 212).

However, because the Tlaxcalans were the Indian tribe who sided with Cortés in order to evict the Mexicas, whom they viewed as oppressors, the Consul’s response acquires an added complexity. In his letter to Cape, Lowry writes “Tlaxcalans were Mexico’s traitors” and underscores that when he argues against intervention, “the Consul is giving way to the forces within him that are betraying himself” (“Sursum” 522). Because the Consul betrays his socialist convictions, failing to act to save his comrade Indian, he is an allegory of the internal divisions within the international community which permit the rise of fascist power, even as he attempts to rationalize his failure to act as for the greater good, like the Tlaxcalans enabling the Spanish conquest.

<sup>15</sup> However, Timothy Mitchell extends his initial proposition about the political culture of cantinas in *Intoxicated Identities* (2004) to argue that alcohol is itself essential to the construction of Mexican identities (10), which problematically echoes the racist stereotype of the “drunken Indian” repeated endlessly through anthropological studies of Mexicans by US writers such as Wallace Thompson.

<sup>16</sup> Working from the Coordinación de Difusión Cultural at the National University, editors such as Carlos Fuentes, Tomás Segovia, Juan García Ponce, and Juan Pacheco transformed the *Revista de la Universidad* into a world-class journal, but the “axis mundi” of their activities was the *Revista Mexicana de Literatura* that spanned from the years 1955–65. These journals launched the careers of their Mexican peers, introduced major Latin American writers such as Julio Cortázar and José Lezama Lima, and provided new translations of “universal” international writers such as Thomas Mann and James Joyce. The edition of *Revista de la Universidad* dedicated to Malcolm Lowry appeared in Nov. 1964 (Bruce-Novoa 149).



wonderful writer. Maybe, even, a *Mexican* writer” (cited in Wutz 10); and Octavio Paz positioned Lowry in a line of “Mexican” writers leading from D.H. Lawrence to Juan Rulfo (“Generaciones” 585). Alejo Carpentier, inventor of the phrase *lo real maravilloso*, praised Lowry’s “extraordinary,” “rare,” work, noting that because of its technical difficulty and peripheral Mexican setting, the novel languished in obscurity until recognized as a “masterpiece” by “old continent” critics, arguing that literature in the Americas must, like *Bajo el volcán*, possess “an energy of its own” which would enable it to transcend national and canonical barriers (“Libro” 1). Some Lowry critics such as Sherrill Grace imply that the novel’s phantasmagorical, hallucinatory reality influenced the formation of magic realism, and Gabriel Garcia Márquez himself declared, “[Under the Volcano] is the novel which I have read so many times that I would prefer never to read it again in my life. But I know that is impossible, because I will never rest until I have discovered where its magic is hidden” (cited in Grace 12).

The novel’s influence extended beyond literature into cinema and art: the great Mexican cinematographer Gabriel Figueroa, who shot John Huston’s film of the novel, argued that without the cinematic fiction of Anglophone writers such as Greene and Lowry, the “Golden Age” of Mexican cinema in the 1940s-50s could not have occurred (cited in Feder 9). A Latin American film of the novel was planned but never reached fruition: Carlos Fuentes urged Guillermo Cabrera Infante to create the screenplay for Luis Buñuel to direct, but while writing, Infante became obsessed and suffered a breakdown, haunted by the “ghost” of Lowry’s personal history and the text as a metaphor for authorial disintegration (Souza 103). The novel’s volcanic, fatalistic imagery and linguistic-visual interplay also inspired the morbid art of Alberto Gironella, a member of the *Generación del Ruptura*.<sup>17</sup> Calling himself the “gravedigger of our time,” Gironella created a series of collages inspired by the novel, as well as the intricate mural *El Via Crucis del Cónsul* used as the Spanish edition’s cover, and declared,

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<sup>17</sup> The movement of artists in the 1950s-60s who called themselves “The Rupture,” emphasizing their break with the pop art and muralism of Rivera and Orozco, and their desire to “internationalize” Mexican art, looking for alternative, more spiritual and transcendental sources of art that did not rely on didactic, figurative, or historical matter.



“Malcolm Lowry created in *Under the Volcano* the greatest poem ever written about Mexico, even greater than the literature of Juan Rulfo” (cited in Bonet 6).<sup>18</sup>

Such a reception, while generous, is problematic, implying compliance with Anglophone critics who promote Lowry’s representation of Mexico as an “authentic” exploitation of “totemic” elements of Mexican geography, history and mythology. Ronald Walker, for instance, argues that Mexico is complicit in its own mystification: “Mexico assaults the outsider with the inscrutable, with bewildering contradictions, with the overwhelming sense of a reality beyond the world of Hard Facts. If these writers deliberately exploit the ‘mystique’ at the expense of literal verisimilitude...then Mexico has repeatedly participated as collaborator in the mythopoeic process” (18). Octavio Paz not only applauds Lowry’s mythic Mexican landscape as “that which sustains the poetic vision,” but accepts it without criticism as a “revelation of that which is behind visual appearances,” “a metaphysics, a religion, an idea of man and the cosmos” (“Generaciones” 585-6). Fuentes similarly marvels at how “Lowry fuses the Mexican landscape with the soul of Consul Firmin” (Wutz 10).<sup>19</sup> Both writers detect that Lowry’s use of landscape is intended less as a representation of Mexico than as the symbolic incarnation of the obsessions of his European protagonist, but excuse this representational violence because of his success in validating Mexico as a literary setting. Furthermore, Lowry’s anti-paradise myth is itself endorsed as peculiarly “Mexican,” part of a progressive use of paradise myth to unveil Mexico’s metaphysical nature through the “construction of a magic space,” which Paz identifies as originating with Lawrence’s *The Plumed Serpent*, expanding in Lowry’s *Under the Volcano*—the “old story of the expulsion from Paradise”—and reaching full realization in Rulfo’s *Pedro Páramo*, the “return to Paradise” (585-6). However, Paz does not question the colonial provenance of this paradise myth.

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<sup>18</sup> “Malcolm Lowry escribió en Bajo el Volcán el poema más grande realizado sobre México, más grande que la literatura de Juan Rulfo con quien me unía una gran amistad” (Gironella cited in Bonet 6).

<sup>19</sup> In another article, “Mexico’s New Wave” (1967), Fuentes echoes Paz’s description of Mexico as a magic, metaphysical landscape: “[The] physical nature of Mexico—a cruel, devouring, sunbaked landscape—is filled with portents of magical distraction. Every force of nature seems to have a mythical equivalent in Mexico. No other nation is quite so totemic...The Mexican artist has seldom been able to act outside the demands of the all-encompassing myth” (128).



Andrew John Miller argues that Lowry's use of northern and southern American borderlands challenges the hegemony of US models of identity (7). However, while Lowry does feature Canada and Mexico more centrally than the US, he exoticizes these border spaces, polarizing their qualities to fit his mythopoeic schema of novels structured along Dante's *Commedia*.<sup>20</sup> Thus southern "fatal" Mexico serves as the setting for the first novel's descent into the *inferno* and northern "genteel Siberia" Canada was planned for the concluding novels' ascension to *paradiso*.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, throughout the novel, Canada is portrayed as the paradisaical alternative to the protagonist's suffering in Mexico—Yvonne, Beatrice-like, pleads with the Consul to leave purgatorial Mexico and follow her to the "sober and non-alcoholic" wilderness of British Columbia: "an undiscovered, perhaps an undiscoverable Paradise" (353)—whereas Mexico's "infernal" nature is insistently explicated, as in Lowry's letter to Cape:

The scene is Mexico...the age-old arena of racial and political conflicts of every nature...where a colorful native people of genius have a religion that we can roughly describe as death, so that it is a good place...to set our drama of man's struggle between the powers of darkness and light...We can see it as a kind of timeless symbol of the world on which we can place the Garden of Eden, the Tower of Babel and indeed anything else we please. It is paradisaical; it is unquestionably infernal. ("Sursum" 508)

This passage reveals Lowry's investment in transnational constructions of Mexico as a "contact zone" for conflicts between cultures and races; as a land of "death" but also of origin and paradise; and as a "timeless" empty, landscape vulnerable to re-writing by the traveller. The parade of dualized tropes is repeated in the

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<sup>20</sup> Lowry entitled this project *The Voyage That Never Ends* and described it in his letters: "The Volcano as the first, infernal part, a much amplified Lunar Caustic as the second, purgatorial part and an enormous novel I was also working on called *In Ballast to the White Sea* (which I lost when my house burned down as I believe I wrote you) as the paradisaical third part, the whole to concern the battering the human spirit takes (doubtless because it is overreaching itself) in its ascent towards its true purpose" ("Sursum" 504). Lowry was thwarted from completing his grand project by the loss of the master manuscript in a house fire, his obsessive habit of revising, and his early death from alcohol-related causes.

<sup>21</sup> Conversely, in his works of fiction set in Canada, *October Ferry to Gabriola* (1970) and "The Forest Path to the Spring" (1961), Lowry alludes to "hellish" Mexico in contrast to the paradise offered by the Canadian wilderness; in *Dark as the Grave in which My Friend Is Laid* (1968), the protagonists' move to Mexico after their Canadian squatter's shack burns down is represented as an exile from "true" paradise to a second, "fallen" paradise. Lowry's focus on Canada and Mexico rather than the U.S. was also due in part to his economic circumstances—he was able to live and write very cheaply in Cuernavaca, Mexico and Dollarton, Canada—it is natural that they should become sources of inspiration.



opening chapter of the novel, when Monsieur Laruelle, a French film director and friend to the Consul, reflects on the “startling” changeability of Quauhnauc’s landscape: it is a barren wasteland of “stones” and “dead trees,” its “grey dunes” recall the “Sahara” in savage Africa, it is as alien as a “strange planet” and fatally beautiful: “there was no denying its beauty, fatal or cleansing as it happened to be, the beauty of the Earthly Paradise itself” (10).

As Paz’s equation between Lowry’s *UTV* and Rulfo’s *Pedro Páramo* suggests, Lowry’s adaptation of colonial tropes of Mexico contributed to their (re)circulation amongst Mexican intellectuals, who reconfigured them to inform their own ideologies of nation-centred models of identity and to vent their anger at the contradictions of capitalist modernity. In *Páramo*, a great Mexican novel which also adopts the myth of descent into the inferno of history, Juan Preciado returns to his mother’s birthplace, Comala, in search of his father, expecting a paradise “filled with light and with the green smell of growing things,” but discovering instead a desolate furnace, a wasteland populated by ghosts, whose purgatorial murmurings singe the air. The former landscape of abundance has been devastated by the greed of the *patron*, Pedro, who has ravished the property and the women of the town. Like Lowry, Rulfo uses the image of a fallen paradise to represent the perversities of economic and cultural oppression, however, unlike Lowry, Rulfo is concerned with the exploitation of the Mexican peasants by local *caciques* and landowners rather than with the postcolonial guilt of Europeans in Mexico. Instead of the hyper-literary allusiveness of Lowry’s late modernist style,<sup>22</sup> Rulfo employs a poetic minimalism of gaps and silences. The myth of inferno, despite echoes of Dante or Virgil, is more indebted to Toltec than European myth, imitating the god Quetzalcoatl’s descent into the underworld,

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<sup>22</sup> Lowry’s dense novel is grafted onto a myriad of mythic structures, including Dante’s *Commedia*, Goethe’s *Faust*, Eliot’s *Waste Land*, Frazer’s *Golden Bough*, Homer’s *Odyssey*, Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*, Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, and Cabbala myth, not to mention Mexican national and pre-Columbian myths. The prolific use of mythopoesis, symbol, allusion, plays-on-words, cinematic references, and stream-of-consciousness is a deliberate challenge to Joyce and the mandarins of high modernism, although the novel was published in 1947, well after the peak of modernism. However, whereas the modernists most usually used myth and symbols to enter into or forge a new tradition from the past, Lowry uses myth and symbol to get inside the present, to reveal what he perceived to be the chaos of modern times (Spender xvi). Furthermore predicting the “baroque” aesthetic fulfilled in José Lezama Lima’s *Paradiso* (1966) and advocated by Alejo Carpentier as the “legitimate style” in which to express the uneven reality of modern Latin America and to straddle the divide between European and Latin American culture, Lowry describes his book as “like some Mexican churrigueresque cathedral” (“Sursum” 527).

seeking the bones of the dead that he might create a new man (Leal 89). The European construction of Mexico as an “infernal paradise” is “Mexicanized” to replace imperial European eyes with those of the Mexican in search of his own past.

Discovering that a return to paradise is impossible, Juan is left to assemble the story of Comala’s disintegration from the whispers of the dead in their graves, piecing together the bones of history. But he is unable to construct a new future, for by the end of the posthumous narrative, Juan discovers that he himself is one of the dead, a ghost speaking from his own grave. The novel thus defers the myth of re-emergence from the underworld into modern, contemporary history; Juan fails to “complete and redeem the past, to purge the present of past crimes and irrationalities” (Larsen 139). Rulfo refuses to believe in the ideologized, modern Mexico promised by the PRI; the novel can thus be seen as a reconfiguration of Lowry’s anti-paradise into a modern anti-Utopia. Yet in his “indigenization” of the “infernal paradise” in order to portray the economic oppression of Mexican peasants, Rulfo stands in danger of replicating Western constructions of Mexico, as when he focuses obsessively on the dead bodies of exploited peasant Indians or assigns the myth of tropical decadence and fatalism to Mexico: “Almost all the country’s tropical areas are violent...The tropics give the inhabitants a very special characteristic...They carry their dead on their shoulders” (cited in Leal 73). Indeed, Neil Larsen asks whether the “transcultural” principle of narration in *Pedro Páramo* might serve to disguise “in a kind of populist masquerade, a deeper, reactionary and pathologizing representation of rural, peasant culture, placing Rulfo securely within the naturalizing ideology that stretched from Sarmiento down to the positive ideologues of the *porfiriato*” (138).

However, Rulfo has also been credited with inventing a new aesthetic which announced the end of the social realism of the revolutionary novel and ushered in magic realism. His reconfiguration of the “inverted paradise” in Mexican terms can therefore be seen as reflective of the ideological incongruities in the circulation of transnational forms and tropes within Mexico, but also revelatory of the moment when Mexican novelists will transcend these tropes, creating from these very points of weakness, material for the newly politicized literature of the



“boom” generation. Writers in the 1960s and 1970s recanted the way their earlier fiction reconfigured colonial constructions as national culture; novels such as Carlos Fuentes’ *Terra Nostra* (1976) parodied the myths of “savage Mexico” taken on by prominent Mexican intellectuals and strived to imagine modes of subjectivity outside this discourse. Building on Alejo Carpentier’s original formation of *lo real maravilloso*,<sup>23</sup> they reconfigured magic realism to express an anti-North-American nationalism and conceptualize localized knowledge in resistance to the onslaught of US-style globalization. However, in the context of intensified globalization since the 1990s, magical realism has become commodified as a major literary trend in international or “world” fiction; Michael Denning argues that it serves as the “aesthetic of globalization,” a device to market the exotic Third World for the consumption of the First (51). The new wave of post-boom magical realism including works by Mexican Laura Esquivel and Brazilian Paulo Coelho has moved beyond the political commitments of the “Boom” generation, “flattening distinct local traditions and presenting pre-modern realities and communities in a way that minimizes the burden of this past” (Sadowski-Smith 726-7).<sup>24</sup>

Since the advent of the Boom novel, *lo real marvellismo* has been used to sell Latin America to Western tourists; yet, in Mexico, this magical realism is of a darker variety. The Mexican tourist industry deploys discourses drawn from the tropes of the “infernal paradise to whose formation Lowry’s work has significantly contributed” (Alcarón 6). Rather than the “feminized paradisaical

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<sup>23</sup> The Edenic language of Humboldt permeates Carpentier’s novels and his concept of America’s *real maravilloso*. Carpentier’s transcultural subjectivity has been celebrated as capturing the essence of the Americas in all its cultural duality, however, it has also been criticized for embodying a “neocolonial legacy of self-alienation” (Pratt 196). Carpentier’s *The Lost Steps* (1953), reenacts the quest for paradise in the Amazon jungle through the eyes of an exiled Latin American intellectual. The protagonist references Bosch’s artificial paradise in his attempt to represent the “alien,” “infernal” landscape of the South American interior: “My memory had to recall the world of Bosch, the imaginary Babels of painters of the fantastic, the most hallucinated illustrators of saints, to find anything like what I was seeing” (Carpentier 155). The “neo-Humboldtian” novel reverses the values of the Edenic discourse: “American cornucopia here is a plenitude not of discovery [or scientific knowability] but of unknowability, a world that metropolitan is unequipped to decipher or embrace” (Pratt 196).

<sup>24</sup> However, some critics have argued that not all magic realist narratives are the products of the aesthetic of globalization. Claudia Sadowski-Smith cites examples of contemporary Chicano writing such as Ito Romo’s *El Puente* (2000) which utilize magical realism to imagine individualized protests which spark political responses in the “form of individual and collective activism for border-crossing rights and environmental justice” (736).



landscapes” which Cohen describes the Caribbean islands as marketing, Mexico’s interior is marketed as a depraved Eden, whose volcanic interior contrasts with the bright beaches of its coasts. Furthermore, this infernal paradise has not been imposed itself on national identity merely via the culture of tourism, but through the PRI which uses myths of Mexico as paradise lost to suppress resistance. These myths circulate in the dominant culture as a ubiquitous economic, social, and media presence. Since the 1950s, “black magical” Mexico has functioned as a transgressive space, the “magic south” to America’s cold north, a locus for impermissible acts: “The so-identified Third World figures implicitly as dark and primitive, a site where ‘instinctual gratification’ is more ‘natural and commonly accepted,’ and the ‘First World’ figures implicitly as enlightened and civilized, a site of ‘sexual repression’” (Aldama 3). In Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* (1959) Sal Paradise and his countercultural friends indulge in a day-long orgy like “a long spectral Arabian dream” in a Mexican whorehouse (266); in Lowry’s *Under the Volcano* the Consul damns himself through sex with an Indian prostitute. Gay white Californian radicals in the 1970s imagined Mexico as a “beautiful, sinister fairyland,” a land of “heat” and “passion,” and collected an anthology of “Latin American gay literature” under the title *Now the Volcano* (1979) (Balderston and Quiroga 97).<sup>25</sup>

Late 20<sup>th</sup>-century travel writing such as Hugh Fleetwood’s *A Dangerous Place* (1985) continues to propagate infernal stereotypes of Mexico as a “dangerous, lovely land,” “predominantly an Indian country,” full of “ugly” Mexicans (15), swathed in tropical decadence—“a smell of tropical vegetation...reeking of ripeness, quick growth, and easy rottenness” (10), where “the past lives on in diminished form” (15). British writer Fleetwood unabashedly attributes his image of Mexico to reading Greene, Isherwood, and Lowry: “I had been expecting

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<sup>25</sup> Mexico is described as “a beautiful sinister fairyland” in E.A. Lacey’s “Latin America: Myths and Realities” (1979), published in the tabloid journal *Gay Sunshine* (Balderston and Quiroga 86). The anthologies of Latin American gay writing produced by the educated elite of the gay radical San Francisco movement are “marked by ambivalence,” imperial constructions “that reveal the tensions inherent in the ‘beautiful’ and ‘sinister’ continent they cover,” and “part of a capitalist venture that sought to couch itself in the language of culture” (Balderston and Quiroga 96). The title of *Now the Volcano*, edited by Winston Leyland and Erskine Lane, “expresses the book’s intention of documenting the emerging gay consciousness in Latin American literature. Recent biographies have made known Lowry’s own bisexuality, the full implications of which he seems to have evaded. So it is perhaps fitting that this anthology should bear a title reminiscent of his masterpiece, but with the signification of real sexual liberation” (Balderston and Quiroga 97).



depravity; I had been hoping for depravity” (6) and is disturbed by the apparent contradiction between Mexico’s natural beauty and its alleged moral and political corruption: “I had believed...that the landscape of Mexico was similarly squalid; the physical equivalent of the moral state. A blasted defeated wilderness, glared down upon by an unkind sun. I had been unprepared, therefore...for finding that the country was beautiful. [...] I tried to resist what I told myself firmly was ‘this mere appearance of loveliness’” (17).

Remarking the continuing valence of Humboldt’s work for Latin American scholars, Mary Louise Pratt suggests the image of American Eden has been renewed in response to the horrors of post-WWII underdevelopment, third-world industrialization, third-world debt, political interventionism, and ecocide (197).<sup>26</sup> The same might be said of Lowry, except that his vision of Mexico is less beautiful, more volcanic, a depraved Eden which has been revived to reflect the political reality of the PRI, the industrialization of Mexico’s borderlands, and the environmental degradation of its rainforests, highlands, and valleys. Francisco Rebolledo’s recent study *Desde la barranca: Malcolm Lowry y México* (2004) attempts to demystify Lowry’s personal life and politics; while the left-leaning Mexican magazine *Proceso* devoted a recent issue (Dec 2000) to re-interpreting the novel in the context of contemporary Mexican society. Yet myths of Lowry’s life and work continue to reverberate in the Mexican popular media, fuelling the “imaginary networks” of national culture. His “magical,” “tragic” conception of Mexico as poised between “*el edén*” and “*la barranca*” is cited as evidence of an “occult” Mexican reality;<sup>27</sup> the hellish psychogeography of *Under the Volcano* is embraced as a mimetic representation of “torrid” Indian provinces<sup>28</sup> such as

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<sup>26</sup> Latin American scholars continue to celebrate Humboldt’s *Views* as “natural” and integral to the formation of American identity: “‘It took’ Alexander von Humboldt to ‘give us a beautiful vision’ of South America”; “Our landscape would have to wait until the nineteenth century to be lovingly and extensively described first but foreign travellers and then by national writers” (Pratt 197). This prompts Pratt to question whether 19<sup>th</sup>-century structures of reception remain unchanged: “Are the relations of authority, hierarchy, alienation, dependency, Eurocentrism that gave the essential aspects of Humboldt’s work their appeal in 1820 still so entrenched as to be invisible?” (197).

<sup>27</sup> See Jorge Alcázar’s “Entre el edén y la barranca: La dimensión mágica y trágica de *Under the Volcano*” (1995).

<sup>28</sup> In an article in *La Jornada* (8 Feb 2003), Subcomandante Marcos argues that the mainstream media represses the subversive potential of “landscape(s) of resistance” by mythologizing their tempestuous, corrupt, or violent nature: “this province...only makes the news when it experiences the passing of hurricanes, earthquakes and false governors, or when oppressive poverty follows the path of armed rebellion.”

Morelos and used to evoke the “decadence” of Mexico’s tropical regions; his “volcanic” vision is praised for predicting the eruption of Popocatepetl;<sup>29</sup> and the myth of his alcoholic death-wish is used to buttress the sales of “marvellous mescal.”<sup>30</sup> Ironically, this concatenation of myths, absorbed into Mexican national culture, amounts to a “black magic(al)” realism which reduces Mexican politics to an occult zone and strips Lowry’s work of its utopian longing and political agency.

### The Politics of Lowry’s Mexican “Anti-Paradise”

“The name of this land is hell. It is not Mexico of course but in the heart.”

- Malcolm Lowry, *Under the Volcano* (1947)

The long-standing tendency of critics to neglect the historical and political context of Malcolm Lowry’s *Under the Volcano* (1947) has recently shown signs of redress. Drawing on Hilda Thomas’ earlier analysis of Lowry’s allusions to the international political crises of the 1930s, Mark Hama interprets the novel as an “anti-fascist jeremiad and a call to political action in the wake of the Spanish Civil War and World War II” (60). Yet, while Hama recuperates Lowry’s protagonist as a political agent motivated by a delayed political epiphany, he fails to examine how the Consul’s politics are muddled not merely by alcohol but by his imaginative immersion in the irrationality of modern myths of Mexico. Taking a different approach, Andrew John Miller reads the novel as a geopolitical allegory of *detritorialization*, illuminating the ways in which the novel “directly challeng[es] the nation-centered model that informs not only British imperialism but also the political cultures of decolonized states” (1). However, by emphasizing this critique of the nation-state over Lowry’s more prominent critique of imperialism, Miller sidelines Lowry’s interest in the revolutionary potential of emerging Latin American socialist movements, and omits to engage with the implications of a critique, whether of national ideology or (neo)imperialism, which is filtered through the infernalization of Mexican landscape, culture, and

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<sup>29</sup> See, for example, José Gordon’s “Bajo el volcán: algunos datos. (El Popocatepetl)” (1997).

<sup>30</sup> Ignacio Ortiz Cruz, director of the recent Ariel-winning film *Mezcal* (2005), claims that Lowry’s novel provided the inspiration for his mescal-addicted characters.



politics. In this section, I will examine the politics of Lowry's representation of Mexico as an anti-paradise in *Under the Volcano*, which unlike other British writing set in Mexico in the 1930s, has as its primary target the critique of conquest and capitalism, rather than the nostalgic construction of a foil to the "ailing" empire of Britain, and which demonstrates a sophisticated historical-political perspective of Mexico's future as inseparable both from past imperialism and from its contemporary ties to the battles for space, resources and power in early 20th-century capitalist Europe. However, I will move beyond recent critical efforts to examine the complexities and contradictions generated by Lowry's "infernalization" of Mexico.

In the first paragraph of the novel, Lowry draws a map of former colonial influence in the Atlantic, South Pacific, Indian Ocean, and Latin America, linking Quauhnuhuac, Britain's abandoned diplomatic outpost in Mexico, to other sites of Anglo-American empire: "It is situated well south of the Tropic of Cancer....in about the same latitude as the Revilagigedo Islands to the west in the Pacific, or...the southernmost tip of Hawaii—and as the port of Tzucoc...near the border of British Honduras, over much further east, the town of Juggernaut, in India, on the Bay of Bengal" (3).<sup>31</sup> The novel is populated by a cast of exiles from former British colonial "paradises" who have fled to the "informal empire" of Mexico. The Consul, Geoffrey Firmin, was evicted from Kashmir as an Anglo-Indian orphan; Hugh, his half-brother, is a socialist journalist in search of utopia; Geoffrey's lover Yvonne, born in Hawaii, comes to Mexico, "seeking for some faith...a meaning, a pattern, an answer" (321). For Lowry's émigrés, Mexico is the end-stop in their search for paradise, an ambivalent image of disappointed yet persistent idealism, hung-over with the perpetual threat of eviction. These Europeans lingering in the "garden" of former empire are haunted by suppressed guilt, the Consul casting himself as Adam in purgatory: "What if Adam wasn't really banished from the garden at all? [...] What if his punishment really consisted...in his having to *go on living there*, alone...suffering, unseen" (133). Consumed by his fear of expulsion from Mexico's fallen paradise, the Consul

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<sup>31</sup> Tristan da Cunha is a volcanic island in the Atlantic which remains an "overseas territory" of the United Kingdom. Hawaii was conquered in 1898 by the US and its monarchy deposed; in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, local Polynesians are still advocating for independence and criticizing the colonization of the islands by North American and Japanese capital.

mistranslates the sign in a public garden, “*Le gusta este jardín que es suyo? Evite que sus hijos lo destruyan!*” to read, “Do you like this garden? Why is it yours? Evict those who destroy!” and indeed, the ex-colonial figure as a destroyer threatened with expulsion by indigenous peoples is a central anxiety in the novel’s grappling with the legacies of colonialism.

The book’s narrative structure is anchored between 1938 and the “Day of the Dead,” November 1, 1939, two months after the outbreak of the Second World War, but also the period during which Britain broke off diplomatic relations with Mexico in retaliation for the nationalization of oil interests. The struggle between the British and Americans for control of the Mexican petroleum industry highlights Mexico’s status as an imperfectly decolonized state susceptible to economic imperialism. The newly “ex”-Consul Geoffrey Firmin bemoans his redundancy, but his lingering presence in the country nevertheless symbolizes the protracted influence of former colonial powers and the growing influence of the neo-imperial US. It is as a figure of this continuing, if indirect imperialism, that he feels most guilt-ridden. The Consul perceives history as a relentless machinery of conquest and colonialism, a “frightful bloody nightmare” symbolized in the novel by the *maquina inferna*. Appearing in varied guises throughout the novel—as a wheel of fate, a train symbolizing the destructive forces of industrialization and economic modernization, or a runaway horse, vehicle of the conquistador—the “infernal machine” situates the Mexican cycle of conquest in the larger context of global imperialism:

First, the Spaniard exploits the Indian, then when he had children, he exploited the half-breed, then the pure-blooded Mexican Spaniard, the criollo, then the mestizo exploits everybody, foreigners, Indians and all. Then the Germans and Americans exploited him: now the final chapter, the exploitation of everybody by everybody else (299-300).

The Consul conceptualizes the Conquest as a fall precipitated by Europeans, the origin of the *inferna maquina*, when Cortés’ “wild surmise,” the impulse to conquer and exploit, was first conceived. However, Hugh repudiates the myth of pre-Columbian Mexico as a paradise of noble savages, insisting: “the Conquest took place in an organized community in which...there was exploitation already...In a civilization which was as good if not better than that of the



conquerors, a deep-rooted structure. The people weren't all savages or nomadic tribes" (300).

Instead, Hugh sees communism as the "new spirit" which can jam the machinery of exploitation, dissolve the structures of capitalism, and open a path out of the "barranca" of history, thus allowing former colonizers and colonized alike to participate in a "rebirth" (301). Hugh's travels in Latin America are linked both to his interest in the outcome of the Spanish Civil War and to his enthusiasm for the revolutionary potential of the developing Latin American nations: Mexico, ostensibly on the periphery of the "First World," is perceived to have the power to influence the outcome of the Spanish Civil War, thus impacting Europe, rather than being acted upon. Through Hugh, Lowry anticipates the emergence of Latin American socialist movements (as well as the success of anti-colonial struggle in India), and envisions the prospect of political agency rather than victimization for legitimate spokespersons struggling to redefine their communities politically, culturally, and economically.<sup>32</sup> Hugh, Yvonne and the Consul are figures of different solutions to the problems of history, empire, and social justice which affect the relationship of Europeans to former colonies. Yvonne represents the fantasy of disengagement, the forsaking of the blighted former colony in favour of a new, unspoiled island of individual pleasure; Hugh advocates communal action over paralytic disengagement; while the Consul rejects Hugh's communism as another paradise myth, a Western "lie" foisting interventionist "cures" on underdeveloped countries. However, their contrapuntal debate between these options is challenged by the ethical quandary posed by their practical encounter with a dying Indian, whom they leave bleeding on the side of the road after the Consul restrains Hugh from aiding the man, lest he be arrested as "an accessory after the fact" by the corrupt Mexican police.

Hama persuasively argues that the Indian is a runner for the *ejidal* land redistribution movement, which actively resisted the national government's appropriation of peasants' lands (62). Thus, by refusing to help him or to call

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<sup>32</sup> Hugh constantly reflects on the status of anti-imperialist conflict throughout the world, particularly on India's struggle for independence from England, and aligns Cárdenas with the anti-colonial leaders Mahatma Ghandi and Nehru Jawaharlal (153).

attention to his assassination, the Consul tacitly supports the fascists who engineered his death. Indeed, his failure to intervene is symbolically linked in the novel to both Trotsky's assassination in Mexico City and Franco's victory in the Spanish Civil War.<sup>33</sup> When he tries to assuage his guilt by arguing that "interference" is far worse than apathy, embodying the interventionist strategies of postcolonial nations seeking to maintain informal control over former colonies, Hugh counters that to refuse political commitment, to do nothing at all, is the same as sanctioning "interference." But Hugh's intimation of an alternative to a self-perpetuating machinery of exploitation and conquest is drowned out by the Consul's cynical logic. "No one can stop the machine," he declares, choosing to descend into drunkenness and guilt. For the Consul, colonialism's legacy, like Philoctetes' sore, is the wound that cannot heal.

Alcohol functions in the novel as an escape from the homogenizing categories of identity which the Consul finds oppressive, but these "partial deterritorializations, dislocations, or deliriums" only "result in ever more violent and restrictive reterritorialization" (Rourke 36).<sup>34</sup> In his mescal stupor, the Consul hallucinates sitting on a toilet, a stone throne, a "grey consulate," and from this "seat of conquest," he asks, "Why was he here? Why was he always more or less, here?" (294).<sup>35</sup> His vision is self-absorbed, homogenizing, blotting out other subjectivities, unable to interrogate any but his own motives. He is obsessed by the delusion of being irrevocably implicated in the *maquina infernal*, whose

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<sup>33</sup> Diego Rivera, founder of the Mexican Communist Party, helped arrange Leon Trotsky's asylum in Mexico after his expulsion from Russia. Trotsky survived one assassination by Stalinist supporters led by David Alfaro Siqueiros, a muralist contemporary of Rivera's. However, in 1940, a Spanish-born Soviet assassin, Ramon Mercader, murdered Trotsky with an ice-axe at his home in Mexico City. Trotsky appears in Diego Rivera's "Man, Controller of the Universe" (1934) mural in the Palacia de Bella Artes, Mexico City.

<sup>34</sup> In his letter to Cape, Lowry declares the symbolic importance of the Consul's mescal binges in the political context of the fight against fascism: "The drunkenness of the Consul is used on one plane to symbolize the universal drunkenness of mankind during the war, or during the period immediately preceding it" ("Sursum" 507).

<sup>35</sup> The novel's form echoes the Consul's hallucinogenic reality; his pursuit of Mexican's depraved Eden in the mescal bottle is characteristic of what Ingrid Daemmrich describes as the paradises of hallucination. In De Quincey's *Confessions of an Opium Eater*, Aldous Huxley's *Heaven and Hell* or Lowry's *Under the Volcano*, opium, mescal and alcohol first seem to afford an "effortless entry into a femininely kinetic, fluid and formless state of bliss, where the questers' masculine traits of aggression and competition dissolve into pure enjoyment." However, these visions of bliss can rapidly disintegrate into terrifying hallucinations, thus "exhibiting a pattern of continuous oscillation between heavenly bliss and hellish terror that threatens to destroy rather than redeem the protagonist" (Daemmrich 215).



wheels are heard “clickerty-click” throughout the novel, representing the inexorable forces of economic “progress.”<sup>36</sup> He may yearn to escape the passport categories of national identity, dreaming “of becoming a Mexican subject, of going to live among the Indians” (301), yet he is incompletely decolonized, imperfectly deconsulized.<sup>37</sup> His identity is entangled in the very tropes from which national mythologies are invented; he cannot imagine Mexico outside the context of its mythic status as a violated, degraded Eden.

The anti-paradise turns on the purgatorial suffering endured by the European who seeks to expunge his guilt, and in Lowry’s novel, the Consul is the primary actor, the primary sufferer. For Miller, the Consul’s rejection of the “liberatory possibilities of national self-determination” is rooted in an innate scepticism of national ideology, because of which the Consul longs to “heal the wounds inflicted not just by colonization but by the emergent ideology of nationalism that was legitimating the colonial process of territorial appropriation” (6). However, it is the Consul’s wounds, not those of the Indians or Mexicans, which are obsessively laid bare; when he first discusses the murdered Indian with Yvonne and Hugh, he argues that the man had to be Indian rather than Spanish: “And why an Indian? So that the incident may have some social significance to him, so that it should appear a kind of latter-day representation of the Conquest, and a repercussion of the Conquest” (296). The real event is divested of its concrete, local particularity and transmuted into a universal “representation,” a symbol intended not to represent or speak for the Indian, but to bear mythological resonance for the Consul. His suffering is dependent upon his ability to read the “signs” of the landscape and subjects around him (often literal signs—the infernal

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<sup>36</sup> The train whose mechanical sounds constantly intrude upon the Consul’s Mexican garden is reminiscent of Leo Marx’s description of the locomotive in *The Machine in the Garden*: “the locomotive, an iron horse or fire-Titan, is becoming a kind of national obsession. It is the embodiment of the age, an instrument of power, speed, noise, fire, iron smoke—at once a testament to the will of man rising over natural obstacles, and yet, confined by its iron rails to a pre-determined path, it suggests a new sort of fate” (191). The locomotive thus suggests the thrusts of American manifest destiny and colonizing capital into Mexico, but for Lowry this is a negative vision, reflecting the extent to which the revolutionary experiment of Mexico is already being betrayed by fascist sympathizers with their own will-to-power, and transformed into the “laboratory of free trade” which it would become in the 1950s after the PRI signed trade accords with the U.S.

<sup>37</sup> The Consul’s drunkenness is another facet of the archetypes of the “stooping Indian” and the *pelado* which he wishes to take on, since the Indian’s fallenness is often associated with his drunkenness, and the alcoholic death-wish recalls the myth of Mexican fatalism consolidated in Octavio Paz’s *The Labyrinth of Solitude*.

machine, the Tlaxcala bulletins, the movie posters, the signboards of the cantinas) in a way that constructs the country in terms of his hellish vision.

The references to beggars, Indians, peasants, and prostitutes which pervade the novel reveal Lowry's humane desire to bear witness to the suffering of Mexicans oppressed by structural poverty and inequality; however, these figures are reduced to abject bodies, symbols of the Consul's tortured consciousness.<sup>38</sup> Nor do these bodies reveal their wounds: when Hugh, Yvonne and the Consul encounter the dying Indian, his face and his wound are concealed beneath his hat, which the Consul restrains Hugh from removing. So although they do see his body, they do *not* "bear witness," they can neither speak for the Indian nor fathom his suffering. They can only orient themselves to his body by appropriating it as a symbol of their voyeuristic guilt. This symbolic "bodying forth" climaxes at the novel's conclusion when the Consul is killed by the *sinarquistas* (fascists), mimicking the Indian's earlier assassination, and thus further effacing the nameless Indian by inscribing the body of the suffering ex-colonial official over his. The European's purgatorial sense of "homelessness," guilt, and exile, of being torn out of history, predominates in the novel, not the trauma of the dispossessed Indian. The "paradise lost" is the paradise *they* have lost, the security of the colonial ideal, not that of the indigenous people.

However, the representational violence embedded in the Consul's appropriation of Mexican bodies as sites of desire and conquest is moderated by Lowry's use of irony, polyphony, and self-parody throughout the novel. Rather than obscuring the discursive processes of appropriation by pretending to represent Mexico through the perception of local inhabitants, Lowry renders transparent the imperialist

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<sup>38</sup> Lowry extenuates the 19<sup>th</sup>-century tradition of colonial masochism, in which the guilty colonizer punishes himself yet still commits representational violence: "In the imaginations of Laurence Sterne, Wordsworth, Blake, or Captain John Stedman, it is possible simultaneously to suffer and to inflict the violence which causes the suffering. Such a seemingly impossible duality is achieved by setting up parallel fantasies in which the role of victim and victimizer are both played out by the same narrational persona" (Wood 13). The topos of the "confident imperialist, stricken with colonial guilt and subject to a mysterious, even occult, punishment in later life" emerges as early as 1775 in Thomas Paine's tract "Reflections on the Life and Death of Lord Clive," in which Clive is tormented by the memories of colonial rapacity in India, and continues in Matthew Lewis's gothic depictions of his slave plantations in Jamaica: "here I expected to find a perfect paradise, and I found a perfect hell" (Fulford 197). However, the Consul's duality is formulated not in response to plantation slavery or formal empire but jeopardized informal empire.



means of representation on which he draws (Rourke 22), as when he explicitly cites the language of tourist guidebooks, exaggerates the viewpoint of “planetary consciousness,” or identifies the Consul with Cortez by having him quote Keats’ “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer.” Furthermore, while the Consul laments his seeming inability to escape from imperial culture and discourse, he is not completely paralyzed. Hama’s revisionary reading of the Consul as advocating political engagement rather than complete despair pinpoints the moment in the cantina when the Consul proclaims “Whatever I do, it shall be deliberately” and then shouts, “You killed that Indian” as evidence that, tortured with indecision, he decides as the last instant to sacrifice his life in order to call attention to the fascist forces strengthening their hold on the region. Because the Consul comes to political awareness too late, permitting the fascists to grow too strong before challenging them, the novel is therefore “an object lesson to those who believe that they might ignore the world around them” (Hama 61). In his January 1948 letter to his publisher Cape, Lowry writes that Geoffrey Firmin “represent[s] the failure of will in western civilization when faced with the rise of fascism” (cited in Hama 60). If Lowry’s novel does advocate political action against fascism and the structural inequalities of capitalist modernity perpetrated in sites of informal empire, it is undermined by its own discursive practices and its inability to conceptualize the possibility of resistance for local Mexicans. Hence, I would argue that this partial failure is not one of ethics, but of aesthetics, as Wilson Harris argues in his celebration and critique of Lowry’s novel.

### **Divine Comedy in Mexico: Wilson Harris’ Critique of Under the Volcano**

“The Inferno releases us and sets all parallels into motion so that Paradise may be found again and again within each age despite universal travail.”

-Wilson Harris, *Carnival* (1985)

Of the critiques of Lowry by South American writers, Wilson Harris’ reading has been the most extensive and perceptive, striking to the heart of the aesthetic

tensiona in the novel.<sup>39</sup> In his lecture “Tradition and the West Indian Novel” (1965), Harris identifies Lowry’s *Under the Volcano* as an “intimation” of the new mythopoetics which he is developing in his own work in order to reconcile “the broken parts” of the American tradition, scattered on either side of the “divide pre-Columbian/post-Columbian” (144). For Harris, Lowry’s novel “achieves a tragic reversal of the material climate of our time, assisted by residual images, landscape as well as the melting pot of history, instinctive to the cultural environment of the Central and South Americas” (“Tradition” 144). In “Comedy and Modern Allegory” (1985), he elaborates how Lowry’s inversion of Dantesque mythopoetics articulates a nascent materialist critique:

[One senses] a subconscious (if not wholly conscious) equation between conquest and the *paradiso*: an equation that seems to me to turn the Dantesque *paradiso* on its head and to inject a bleak, overturned, ‘divine comedy of existence’ into *hollow* contracts between wealth and poverty, between men and women, between landlords and peasants. What is arbitrary, changes its tone and becomes a threshold into the abuse of human and other resources, an abuse that is built into perverse privilege, or perverse *paradiso* to which humanity is addicted. (“Comedy” 138)

Harris’s recognition that Lowry’s critique is not wholly conscious points to the central tension in Lowry’s use of the anti-paradise. The inversion of paradisaal Mexico into a tragic inferno opens a gateway into the global history of conquest, exploitation, and dispossession, but cannot view these outside the calcified colonial discourse nor offer any possibility of redemption for either the abusers or the abused. The anti-paradise only reiterates its function as the expression of the suppressed guilt of the European, suffering the consequences of the disappointed search for paradise, and conscious of no longer, or never, *belonging* in the country. According to Harris, Lowry is hindered by “the ‘impossible’ task” of seeking to create “sovereign or separate realms in consistency with the apparatus

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<sup>39</sup> Although Harris is Guyanese, rather than Mexican, Anglophone, rather than Hispanic, and could be considered either Caribbean or South American, his work is still relevant to the context of Latin America and Mexico, because he himself chooses to write about Mexico in *Companions of the Day and Night*, situating the country as part of the shared history of the “extended Caribbean” and “the Other America,” whose formation stands in opposition to North America. Harris, like Paz and Fuentes, discusses Lowry in the context of the alleged lineage leading from Lawrence to Lowry to Rulfo. Harris and Lowry share a preoccupation with myths of paradise and inferno, a project to re-write Dante and to re-read the signs of Conquest, and a concern with the Amerindian past, all of which provide a rich basis for comparison.



or the cosmos Dante employed in his age” when our age demands instead “a revival of Dantesque allegory...in which hell and heaven begin to lose their incorrigible separation and design, their absolute conscription of soul” (“Comedy” 131).

Throughout his own fiction, Harris restructures Dantesque allegory in order to explode the “block functions” of binary oppositions and colonial hierarchies by imaginatively embedding *inferno*, *purgatorio*, and *paradiso* not as absolutes, but as simultaneous and shifting states into which all his protagonists must enter in order to achieve atonement and reconciliation. In his novel set in Mexico, *Companions of the Day and Night* (1975), the archaeologist tourist Idiot Nameless descends into the inferno of Mexico’s past, following his guide, the blind Fool: “It was the Fool who saw for himself the necessity to descend into hell in naked dress if one were to preserve heaven—to descend into hell as terrifying compassion and a capacity to entertain all guides” (21). This descent opens a gateway between the twin cultures of Mexico’s past, Spanish Catholic and Mexica/Toltec, which are united by “a mutual body of sacrifice arching back across centuries of Christ and Montezuma, *conquistadors* and emperors” (Harris 21).<sup>40</sup> Unlike the Consul’s self-destructive plunge, Nameless’ descent is a process of historical quarrying which reveals “post-revolution convents that seemed to sink...into excavations that had recently commenced, after centuries of eclipse, into pre-Conquest Toltec shrines concealed in mounds and hills” (31). This fossilized archaeology bears witness to the failure of colonial Spanish Catholicism to eradicate indigenous religion and to the cultural hybridity which imbues the seemingly catastrophic meeting of European and Amerindian civilizations with new possibility: “in Mexico...a cleavage exists within the ethics of sacrifice entertained by divided civilizations, different cultures rooted in pre-Columbia, post-Columbia worlds, pre-revolutionary, post-revolutionary states” (Harris 49). This scission both separates and weds the civilizations: it is the divide, the expression of the trauma of

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<sup>40</sup> Lowry predicts Harris’ transnational literary aesthetic by melding European images of Dante’s dark wood, the apocalyptic Mount of Perfection, the fertile garden, and the crystal fountain (Walker 246) with pre-Columbian images of the valley and volcano as positioned between the thirteen paradises and nine hells of Nahuatl cosmology in order to forge his chthonic image of Mexico.

Conquest, but also a cleaving together, the impossible *conunctio* of different cultures, of past and present, inferno and paradise.<sup>41</sup>

In *Carnival* (1985), set in the Caribbean, Harris similarly re-invents Dantesque allegory, employing “reversible fictions” and “convertible metaphors” in order to create the possibility of redemption from and within the “inferno” of history. The novel’s West Indian protagonist Everyman Masters is a representative both of the “slave” or colonized, and the “master” or “colonizer,” because he becomes an overseer on a sugar plantation and abuses his position to sleep with women. To atone, he must, like Idiot Nameless, descend into hell, bearing witness to the absences and silences of history inflicted by the traumas of colonialism and slavery in South America. Following Masters as he passes from the colonial past into the postcolonial present (where he labours in the hellish factories of post-war England), Harris simultaneously represents the wounds of history—the legacies of colonialism which carry on into the abuses and exploitations of the neocolonial present—and the *paradiso*, the possible reconciliation achieved through the imagination and union of individuals. Everyman’s various experiences “descent into the modulated Inferno, modulated Purgatory, of twentieth-century colonial limbo” together form “a twentieth-century divine comedy of existence” (38-9) which is structured to break down the rigidity of discursive formations, what Harris calls “block functions”: colonizer/colonized, master/slave, victimizer/victimized, male/female, paradise/inferno.

Harris writes of Masters that if he had “forfeited the mystery of partial guilt,” he would have appeared narcissistically whole, and allowed himself to be constituted in the identity of violated. Instead, it is his “capacity to employ such partial fracture” that is “an integral element in unraveling/overcoming the lure of diseased Ambition or conquest” (25). Each of *Carnival*’s characters must negotiate the “labyrinth of innocence and guilt” (17) of their complicity with imperialist discourse in order to attain freedom outside it. No matter what their status, male or female, servant or overseer, European or islander, educated or

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<sup>41</sup> However, Wilson Harris’s insistence on a “shared body of sacrifice” between the Aztecs and the Catholics re-emphasizes the cult of Mexico as blood-drenched land and his emphasis on the imagination is detached from political praxis or analysis of current material conditions in Mexico.



illiterate, each has access to “the language of unconscious” and can make imaginative leaps according to their abilities. They are not homogenized; they are not wholly victims.<sup>42</sup> For Harris, the “transfigurative wounds” of history are the vehicle for transformation. Masters’ father, discovering that his wife-to-be has been raped by a white man and has become pregnant, chooses to marry her rather than abandon her, and brings up the child as his own, rather than forcing her to have an abortion. The pupil of Masters, Jonathan Weyl, is “intrigued at the origins of such conversion of humiliation into the genius of love that differed from the natural impact of humiliation upon the material body (26). Instead of treating his wife like the *chingada*, simultaneously the violated and the betrayer, Masters’ father transcends the categories of blame and violation. Everyman urges Jonathan to write a book which acknowledges the “tormented colonial” age of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but imagines the Americas as a site of potential resistance rather than perpetual violation by revealing “within its multiple perspectives...the essence of love and love’s imperial malaise, love’s imperial tribulations within the plantation, institution, metropolis, factory, everywhere” (32).

Lowry also attempts to use Mexico as a gateway to represent the multiple dispossessions of the global history of imperialism and capitalist modernity. The Consul’s recognition of his failure to love—*no puede vivir sin amar*—indicates his awareness of the need for a transforming impulse of reconciliation, yet he cannot transfigure the wound, cannot envision *paradiso*, except as the “false paradise” of the exotic which he condemns, or the fantasy of escape to a Canadian Eden.<sup>43</sup> The Consul refuses to relinquish his masochistic suffering, what Harris calls “the wounds of hell by which we glorify the individual in traditions of

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<sup>42</sup> Cameron McCarthy and Greg Dimitriadis catalogue a list of “double characters” in *Carnival*: “Masters...wears the twin masks of slave and overlord, plaintiff and accused, subject and object of history. There is also Johnny the Czar and Carnival King, a petty plantation bureaucrat by day and a village radical by night...Jane Fisher the First and Jane Fisher the Second, Amerindian wife of a fisherman of New Forest, English paramour to Masters. There is Doubting Thomas...the protector of the young Masters and heroic saviour of Charlotte Bartleby, the Market woman whom the racketeer Johnny the Czar attacks. Through these double characters, *Carnival* pursues its themes of transgression and reconciliation beyond life’s stalemate of one-dimensional power” (208).

<sup>43</sup> The Consul’s fantasy is of escape to a private one-man, one-woman island in the Canadian wilderness. Here, Adam and Eve (Gregory and Yvonne) can live outside civilization, without paying taxes, without paying rent, living in complete self-sufficiency, eating the fish of the ocean. This return to an Edenic agricultural, pastoral tradition is a retreat from civilization, from participation in a capitalist system. It is also rooted in the Crusoe myth: the private island Eden, the individual empire. All this implies a retreat from consequences, from socialist responsibility: it is an extension of the Consul’s doctrine of non-intervention.



conquest” (“Carnival” 45),<sup>44</sup> failing to make the imaginative leap out of what Harris terms the “subtle abyss,” Lowry the “*barranca*” of history. The volcano’s hallucinogenic explosion in the consciousness of the Consul as he lies dying in the ravine symbolizes the destruction of Lowry’s intimations of utopian possibility. The Consul’s problem is that he is paralyzed by guilt, stripped of hope, constructing the world through the prism of his despair. In *Carnival*, Harris’ hero dies and descends into the inferno, but ascends again, the mythic disjuncture of his resurrection bearing him across the “symmetry of hell” (Camboni 10). In *Under the Volcano*, the obsessive “symmetry of design” in Lowry’s aesthetic bears the Consul implacably towards destruction, foreclosing the possibility of inner movement towards otherness.

Throughout his work, Harris successfully engages in the deconstruction and reconciliation of Manichean opposites, aimed at breaking down the polarities of discourse which paralyze fiction like Lowry’s. However, as with Walcott’s “revolution of the lie,” the question remains whether the imaginative, literary possibilities of Harris’ “reversible fictions” and “controvertible metaphors” can be extended into the economic, material realm. Conceiving a metaphysical language of “love and reconciliation” which enables the spiritual recognition of complicity with oppressive structures is not the same thing as portraying material, collective resistance to those structures, although perhaps the former can motivate the latter. Harris’ notion of transcultural hybridity seems to offer only a limited kind of discursive resistance, for while recognizing that social dualities are the historically inevitable result of colonization and the continued neo-colonial relation of South America to the global economic order, he does not similarly acknowledge that the only true way of dissolving these dualities is not through a reinvention of cultural divisions as cultural unities, but rather by changing the economic conditions which produce them.

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<sup>44</sup> In *Carnival*, Harris describes these wounds in the tandem with the possibility of redemptive wholeness and reconciliation, which he imagines, even though it does not yet exist: “Wholeness opens the prospects of climates of passion and emotion that reflect each other, *not* to overwhelm each other but to ‘redeem’... the fragmentation of cultures [...] It gives creative tension to doubts and uncertainties...reflecting...curiosity about the wounds of heaven that revive a concept of innocence, the wounds of hell by which we glorify the individual in traditions of conquest. Wholeness releases partiality to confront itself in others as a necessary threshold into the rebirth and the unity of Mankind beyond the rhetoric of salvation, beyond the rhetoric of damnation” (45).



Similarly, Lowry's modernist mythopoesis strains to overcome dichotomies, but because the novel exploits Mexico's revolutionary mystique to embody the infernal experience of the European without incorporating a prospect of Mexican resistance, it is trapped in the illogic of the tropes and mythic structures on which it draws.<sup>45</sup> His vision is not directed towards creating a "poly-historic gateway of imagination" that will overcome the apparent "void of history" for the indigenous peoples of the Americas (Harris "History" 166). Instead, while posing as universal, it remains rooted in European master narratives and myths—the *Commedia*, the *Aeneid*, *Faust*—as his plot follows the European man undergoing the purgatorial quest, not the woman, nor the Mexican, nor the Amerindian. Harris describes the novel as set in Mexico City, a significant mistake, since the novel seems disconnected from the artistic, social, and political ferment taking place in the capital. In Lowry's Cuernavaca, as in Greene's remote Chiapas, there is only the waste land—intruded upon by signs of the outside world, curling film posters for German films, omens of the Spanish Civil War and the impending Second World War, but almost untouched by the optimism of the cultural nationalists, the idealistic muralists.<sup>46</sup> Instead, in order to people his infernal paradise, Lowry appropriates class and race archetypes from the "universalist" discourse portraying "pathological" Mexico as undermined by its savage Others, thus further aggravating the discursive tensions in the novel.

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<sup>45</sup> His "impossible tradition" chronologically and spatially separates paradise and the inferno. Because the novel is designed to embody only the *Inferno* experience, instead of incorporating the prospect of *Paradiso*, Mexico is doomed to function as nothing more than the anti-paradise of the white man's description.

<sup>46</sup> Lowry lived in Cuernavaca in 1936 at a time when Mexico was a popular travel destination and residence for leftist writers and artists including Sergei Eisenstein, Leon Trotsky and Luis Buñuel. Cuernavaca is the capital of Morelos, the state where Emilio Zapata's peasant revolt originated. The most sustained assault on indigenous communal lands occurred in Morelos because the land was ideal for sugar plantations (Grieshaber 118). Thus, as a locus of both extreme exploitation and violent resistance, Cuernavaca lends itself to Lowry's vision of "infernal paradise." However, by 1938, the "City of Eternal Spring" was already being transformed into a bohemian resort town whose central attractions were the double-temple of Tlaloc-Hutzilopochtli, the Palace of Cortés, and Maximilian's summer palace. Latin-American artists who have lived and worked in Cuernavaca include Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, Carlos Fuentes, and Gabriel García Márquez. In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, rapid increases in population and traffic volumes have caused severe congestion and air pollution, and the city struggles to accommodate the flood of expatriate "gringo" artists on the trail of Lowry's infernal exotic.

## ***Under the Volcano* and the Masks of Mexican Identity**

*Under the Volcano's* setting in the province of Morelos, and its use of Quauhnauc, the Nahuatl name for Cuernavaca, signposts the centrality of dispossessed Indians and their melancholic relation to the land in the construction of Lowry's anti-paradise.<sup>47</sup> Versions of the "stooping Adam" appear throughout the novel, most pointedly in the scene which Lowry dubs his "symbol of universality," when the Consul observes a pair of "stooping Indians":

Bent double, groaning with the weight, an old lame Indian was carrying on his back, by means of a strap looped over his forehead, another poor Indian, yet older and more decrepit than himself. He carried the older man and his crutches, trembling in every limb under this weight of the past, he carried both their burdens. (280)

The Consul perceives the pair as representative of Mexico's subjects, characterized by abjection and crippled by their history of violation; they could also be said to be crippled by the symbolic burden which they must bear.<sup>48</sup> The second pair of cripples who appear to the hallucinatory Consul in the Farolito cantina on the brink of his political epiphany demonstrate his need for the Indian peasant to be both pitiable—the beggar—and pitying—the m(other):

One legless, was dragging himself through the dust like a poor seal. But the other beggar, who boasted one leg, stood up stiffly, proudly, against the cantina wall as if waiting to be shot. Then this beggar with one leg leaned forward: he dropped a coin into legless man's outstretched hand. There were tears in the first beggar's eyes ...[The Consul] saw that the face of the reclining beggar was slowly changing to Senora Gregorio's, and now in turn to his mother's face, upon which appeared an expression of infinite pity and supplication. (340-1)

The second beggar's compassion presages the Consul's redemption at the end of the novel, when an Indian bends over his immobile body and whispers

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<sup>47</sup> Lowry translates Quauhnauc as "where the eagle stops," referencing the founding myth of Aztec empire and the displacement of the Aztecs by European imperialism (Walker 271)

<sup>48</sup> Unlike Alejo Carpentier's and Walcott's vision of "modern Adam," the heroic Caribbean peasant or fisherman who names his marvellous reality, Mexico's stooping Adam is doomed, mute, made abject by his history of violation.



“Compañero.” Earlier in the novel, Laruelle chastises the Consul for being “insulated from the responsibility from the responsibility of genuine suffering...Even the suffering you do endure is largely unnecessary. Actually spurious” (219). The beggars embody a physical pain that is a corrective to this abstract suffering, but they also function as incarnations of the Consul’s obsessive interior consciousness. In a state of self-disgust, the Consul attempts to reconstitute his identity and achieve absolution by expelling his guilt and disgust onto the bodies of the Indians, but by doing so, ironically transforms them into degraded figures of the very colonial discourse he wishes to escape.

Whereas Lowry’s peasants are forced to embody post-colonial guilt, in Mexican national culture an obscure stigma of guilt is attached to the popular masses in order to legitimize the political domination to which they are subjected. They occupy a paradoxical space between paradise and fall, being representative of a golden age, yet also embodying the violence of the Revolution and enduring the “sins of the modern epoch” (Bartra “Cage” 20). After the Revolution, the appropriation of land and the destruction of rural traditions catalyzed a mass migration of the population to cities, forcing the creation of a proletariat, the despised *pelado*, or modern urban peasant. In contrast to the “stooping peasant,” whose poignancy derives from his mythic association with the primitive, suffering Indian, the *pelado* is imagined as aggressive, yet absurdly naive, trapped between modernity and his barbarous past. His rage at his alienating urban environment and his alleged inferiority complex manifests as an impotent *machismo*. If the bowed, servile figure is the incarnation of the degraded paradise, the lower-class *pelado* is the incarnation of the abject, the *pharmakos* onto whose head “the priests of the new nation” transfer “the iniquities of Mexicans and...the sins of the nation,” before expelling him to “the oblivion of the asphalt desert” (Bartra “Cage” 139).

In *Under the Volcano*, Lowry’s *pelado* appears as a thief picking the pockets of the dying Indian, sickening Hugh by juggling the bloodstained pesos in his “smeared conquistador’s hands” (250), thus distracting from the less visible violence of the fascist *sinarquistas*, and making the *pelado* the focus of revulsion at the nation’s economic inequalities, rather than the political elite, as Hugh

reflects: “Pelados were indeed ‘peeled ones,’ the stripped, but also those who did not have to be rich to prey on the really poor” (235). The dichotomy set up between the murdered Indian whose “loose white garments” connote purity and nobility, and the *pelado*, whose carnivalesque attire of expensive suit, sole-less shoes, and two hats—“a kind of cheap Homburg fitting neatly over the broad crown of his sombrero”—signifies the latter’s uncomfortable status between classes and national-racial categories (234). Lowry’s drunken, cunning, and grotesque figure echoes the indigenists’ perverse imagining of *mestizaje* as a state of racial impurity that breeds treachery, but it is also a reaction against the essentializing formations of Mexican national identity which make no room for hybrid subjectivities outside of “fully-assimilated” *mestizaje* or “pure” Indianness.

The Consul himself assumes the role of the *pelado* when he confronts the fascist Chief of Rostrums, who hurls a series of sexual and racial epithets at him—“Jew chingao,” “cabrón,” “pelado”—before shooting him (362-3). As he lies dying, the word fills his consciousness: “It was as if, for a moment, he had become the pelado, the thief” (373); and when his corpse is thrown into the ravine, followed by a dead dog, it is clear that he has become the pariah, ejected from the country as he had always feared.<sup>49</sup> His death slides between mythic fissures: he is the European scapegoat atoning for empire and exploitation, sating the alleged blood-thirst of the Indian and finally earning the compassion of the “old fiddler, stooping over him.” He is Christological, atoning for previous *acedia* with the ultimate display of *caritas*, self-sacrifice in the name of political commitment. He is “Juden,” echoing the contempt in which Jews have been held in Christian societies, and proleptically intimating the Holocaust enabled by the unchecked

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<sup>49</sup> Pariah dogs follow the Consul throughout the novel; at the end he dies like a dog. However, there is another potential layer of meaning. In pre-Columbian mythology, the Mexican dog was a *nahual*, the repository of a suffering human soul, sanctified by the Toltecs. Through his death, the Consul appears to have achieved communion with the suffering of the Indians, and becomes sanctified at the moment when he seems most abject. In Abel Posse’s *Dogs of Paradise* an army of “diminutive dogs of Paradise” invades Spanish-administrated Hispaniola: “Undersized, voiceless beasts so undoglike that the first Spanish chronicles had even denied their genus...[and] described them as a ‘species of edible rodents’... Insignificant, always denigrated, now in numbers they formed a mammoth and formidable beast. Their enormous peaceful, silent presence was terrifying” (299). Posse imagines the dogs as the rebellious souls of dispossessed Indians, transforming the dogs from symbols of abject suffering to potential collective resistance: “Since that day...these standard-bearers of nostalgia have declared rebelliousness through lack of action...Ever since, in silent packs, they have wandered field and town, from Mexico to Patagonia” (300).



rise of fascism. But he is also the *pelado*, expelled to cover up the “sins” of the fascist-nationalists, taking on a hybrid version of the Mexicanness for which he has always longed. This fluctuation is characteristic of Lowry’s problematic doubling strategies throughout the novel, which in trying to deterritorialize the Consul ends up employing polarized stereotypes of Mexican identity to represent him as uneasily alternating between conquistador/victim, exploiter/exploiter, Anglo-Indian/Mexican-Indian.

The police chief’s epithets *chingar/chingao* further locate the Consul in an unstable dichotomy between sexual violator/violated, alluding to the episode directly preceding the Consul’s assassination, when he sleeps with a Zapotecan prostitute, María. Her name invokes the Virgin Mary and the Indian Virgin of Guadalupe, and because she sleeps with the Consul, a Cortés figure, she embodies the archetype of *la chingada* defined by Octavio Paz: a representative of the “violated Mother” who is associated with the violation of the Conquest “not only in the historical sense but also in the very flesh of [all] Indian women...who were fascinated, violated or seduced by the Spaniards” (cited in Walker 275). Recalling Dona Malinche, Cortez’s mistress, the *chingadalupe* is simultaneously treacherous and victimized, and María’s “treachery” is implicit in the selling of her body to the “foreigner” and revelatory of the economic exigencies in the relationship between former colonizer and colonized. However, the Consul’s “betrayal” takes center-stage, for when he penetrates María as if “her body was Yvonne’s” (349), he sees a picture of Canada hanging over her blood-stained bed and realizes that his sexual transgression is “the final nail in his crucifixion” (351). His masochistic desire for self-punishment drives him to re-enact the cycle of violation and possession precipitated by the Conquest, suborning María as his accomplice, and her body as a fleshly incarnation of the *inferna maquina*, “a fiendish apparatus for calamitous sickening sensation” (349). The loss of paradise—Canada—is explicitly connected with sexual conquest; while Mexico is once again imagined as a savage borderland in which transgressive sexual acts occur.

Significantly, it is María, not Yvonne, who bears the weight of the Consul’s desire and his fall, who acts as the site onto which the Consul can both project and penetrate his own doubleness, his simultaneous yearning for redemption and

inclination to destruction. Lowry appropriates the myth of the *chingadalupe* which was codified in post-Independence Mexican culture in order to endow the Anglo-Indian Consul with the deepest expression of patriarchal, imperial guilt, casting him literally as a “chingar,” while at the same time enabling the Consul to identify with the “stooping Adam” by defining himself in relation to a dualized female Other, a Mexican-Indian Eve who represents the repressed desires of the indigenous past. The symbolic relation which Lowry establishes between sexual commerce and conquest is clearly intended to criticize the political and economic abuses of global imperialism, for when the Consul enters María’s bedroom, he notices a phallic Kashmiri saber standing next to a “Spanish history of British India” (348), thus yoking together the Spanish conquest of Mexico with the continuing British colonization of India, so that the Mexican-Indian woman’s body becomes a site for the violation of two “Indian” civilizations. However, she is stripped of subjectivity, reduced to a mythic vessel through which the Consul achieves “ultimate contamination.” Only the ambiguity of her repeated solicitation, “Quiere María”—not just “does one want Maria,” but “Maria wants”—hints at the possibility of female, non-European agency, an intimation supplanted at the end of the novel by the insistent demonstration of the Consul’s political agency through self-sacrifice.

The irony of *Under the Volcano* is that Lowry displays an unusual receptivity towards Mexican culture and politics, participating in a transcultural circulation of tropes and myths, yet remains locked in the irrationality of neocolonial discourses which cannot conceive alternative forms of subjectivity and resistance. He brilliantly reconfigures residual materials of Mexican culture, geography, and history to embody the melancholic guilt of the Consul lingering in the imperfectly decolonized state and to ground his materialist critique in specific context by forging local archetypes into an “anti-paradise” whose tragic inversion symbolizes the structural inequalities of informal imperialism and capitalist modernity.<sup>50</sup> Yet,

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<sup>50</sup> Benita Parry cites Herbert Marcuse’s dialectical notion of a radical aesthetic in conjunction with Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and Tayeb Salih’s *Season of Migration to the North* (“Postcolonial” 132; “Reflections” 73). The same citation from Marcuse’s *Aesthetic Dimension* might be applied to Lowry’s *Under the Volcano*: “the radical qualities of art, that is to say, its indictment of established realities and its invocation of the beautiful image...of liberation are grounded precisely in the dimensions where art *transcends* its social determination and emancipates itself from the given universe of discourse and behaviour while preserving its overwhelming presence” (6).



in the very doing so, he aids the consolidation of colonial tropes of “savage” Mexico and “infernal paradise” as authentic myths of national culture, which would later be incorporated into the self-perpetuating machinery of modern capitalist society to justify the continuing exploitation of the lower classes and thwart their struggle for the land with the myth of the already-lost paradise. Thus his work bequeaths a legacy of myth which would be embellished after his death and which would increasingly obscure his true political intent.

## Chapter 3

# Dark Paradise, Lost Ophir: Colonial Imaginaries of East Africa

“And for a time that's what Europeans thought Africa was. Paradise.”

- Aminatta Forna, *Ancestor Stones* (2006)

“Geography is good, but Gold is better.”

- Richard Burton, *To the Gold Coast for Gold* (1883)

In Hieronymous Bosch's triptych, “The Garden of Earthly Delights,” (1504) three black women appear in the foreground of the central panel depicting the artificial paradise (see Figure 2). They are identical in form and gesture to the pale bodies proliferating over the rest of the panel, yet are jet black, with protruding lips and brilliantly white pupils in blank faces, seen only in profile. Like Dürer painting the rhinoceros unseen, Bosch struggles to represent Africans on the basis of hearsay, inscribing the imagined signs of difference—lips, color, eyes—on the classical European form. Two pose with large red fruits balanced on their heads, emblems of transgressive desire. The figure to the left barely conceals an apple in her left hand, behind her back, an African Eve inversely mirroring the white, golden-haired Eve at centre. Posed in Bosch's hallucinatory paradise amidst an orgy of insatiable consumption, the Africans signify “an unhappy Orientalism, a discourse of desire unfulfilled and unfulfillable” (Miller “Blank” 23).

The imagination of Africa as “old,” “backwards,” or “fallen” markedly contrasts utopian visions of the “New World” of the Americas. Philip Curtin, V.Y. Mudimbe, Christopher Miller, and Patrick Brantlinger, among others, have excavated the genealogy of the “image of Africa” in the “colonial library” of Africanist discourse. They catalogue a list of (mis)representations of Africa as “blank darkness,” “*la nullité civilisatrice*,” “the dark continent,” the void.





Figure 2: Detail of Foreground of “The Garden of Earthly Delights” (1504).



However, while negative representations of an infernal continent proliferate in Africanist literature, the paradise myth nevertheless surfaces continuously as a manifestation of the lust for material gold-lands and raw resources which the discourse of negation seeks to conceal. Throughout the medieval and early modern periods, paradise was imagined in almost every region of African geography, from the Fortunate Isles, the equator, the antipodes, the source of the Nile, Guinea, and the Ethiopian Mount Amara, to the Mountains of the Moon (Relaño 1-12). In this chapter, I will trace the specific genealogy of paradise discourse revolving around the ancient entrepôt of Zanzibar in East Africa in relation to the economies of both European and Arab mercantilism and colonialism. Before moving to a concentrated analysis of Zanzibar's role in the colonial imaginary during the late 19<sup>th</sup>-century "scramble for Africa," I will review the myths about Africa crystallized by Homer, Dante, Camões, and Milton in the medieval and early modern periods.

Titillated by the spices which travelled from Africa through Arabian traders to the markets of the Mediterranean world, classical writers such as Cicero and Horace imagined Africa as a source of radiant wealth, paralleling the riches of the East. The aromatic commodities exchanged on the Cinnamon Route originated in the Malay Archipelago, crossed the Indian Ocean, landed at Madagascar and were transported to East African trading ports, from which Arab merchants moved them northwards to Ethiopia, Yemen, and Egypt, and then to the markets of Europe (Innes Miller 3). However, the Arabs controlled the Mediterranean spice trade by keeping secret the monsoon sources of the commodities. Although Alexandrian merchant Cosmas Indicopleustes ventured in search of these sources in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, the Roman empire remained ignorant of the monsoon winds and interior caravan routes which facilitated the spice trade (Innes Miller 6). Classical discourse about the African continent split into dual polarities: Africa as a Homeric "lost paradise" and Africa as "void and unformed prior to its investment with shape and being by the Christian or Islamic discourse" (Miller "Blank" 13). Homer's epics crystallized a series of paradisiacal topoi, including the Hesperides, the Lotus Eaters, and the Fortunate Isles, for which Europeans would continue to search well into the 15<sup>th</sup> century. In the *Iliad*, Africa is represented synecdochically by "happy Ethiopia," a land "given over to Delight," a representation echoed in



other Roman portrayals of Ethiopia as the “playground of the gods” (Miller “Blank” 24). A precursor of the noble savage, the “godlike and blameless” Ethiopian inhabits an earthly paradise of abundance, unspoiled by sin. However, the “faultless Ethiopian” subsisted alongside racist representations of Africans as “virtueless slaves” and gibbering, sub-human savages, thus producing “in addition to an Other-as-dream, an Other-as-nightmare” (Miller 25). The two radically opposed traditions of “Homer’s lost paradise” and “Herodotus’ nightmare” coexisted as functions of the same “blankness,” constituting different ways of imagining and writing about Africa as a void (Miller 32).

The meteoric rise of Islam after the 7<sup>th</sup> century prevented further European exploration and exploitation of the African spice routes. In the medieval period, sub-equatorial Africa remained unmapped by European cartographers. Below Roman Africa and the Libyan desert, which acted as synecdoches for the whole of Africa, the continent remained mysteriously blank. Thus, in Dante Alighieri’s *Commedia* (1321), Virgil and Dante emerge from the bottom of hell onto the shores of Purgatory, an island in the Southern hemisphere. Where the continent of Africa should be, Dante imagines instead a vast ocean and an uninhabited isle.<sup>1</sup> Spying an unfamiliar constellation, Dante imagines himself the first living person to see the Southern Cross since Adam and Eve in Paradise. The four brilliant stars correspond to the four cardinal virtues lost since the fall (Pechey 10). As Dante scales Purgatory’s mountain, growing ever closer to Heaven, the earthly paradise becomes visible at its peak.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, as the interstitial space between the inverted inferno, the lost Eden, and the heavenly paradiso, Dante’s Africa is an atemporal space which preserves the values of the terrestrial paradise, yet is paradoxically empty of human history. Dante’s mythologizing of Africa as a metaphysical terrain annexing purgatorio and paradiso forms the template for later imperialist writing about the continent which romanticizes the purgatorial sufferings of Europeans penetrating the interior in search of paradisaal riches.

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<sup>1</sup> Grove notes that Dante must have been aware of the reality of the newly discovered islands in the Atlantic, the “Fortunate Islands” of the Canaries and Madeira, and may have modelled his purgatory on these African islands (33).

<sup>2</sup> Dante’s location of the earthly paradise on the peak of a mountain forges a topos which reappears in Mandeville and Columbus’s travel narratives.

The other great paradise myth to emerge in medieval period was the legend of Prester John's kingdom, originating in the 12<sup>th</sup> century when Ottoman power became a serious threat to the Crusader kingdoms in the Holy Land. While Europe descended into the dark ages, Islamic mercantilism expanded deeper into Asia and Africa. Emporiums, cities and palaces sprang up throughout the widening Muslim world, fuelled by the precious commodities of the spice trade. Medieval Europe responded to the growing political might of the Islamic empire by demonizing the Saracens. Arab economic domination of the cinnamon, clove, silk and gold routes provoked envious fantasies of the marvellous wealth associated with the semi-mythic cities of Ormuz, Aleppo and Ophir (Kabbani 17). In 1165, the delivery of a forged letter to Emperor Manuel of Byzantium precipitated the rumour that Prester John, the legendary priest-king of a prelapsarian kingdom on the borders of the far Orient, would come to the rescue of the Crusader kingdoms.<sup>3</sup> Prester John represented "the possibility of encircling and transcending Islam, for he was a pure projection of the European self onto the unknown: instead of the other as complete alien, the other as double of yourself" (Miller 35). Tales of the boundless wealth of his land, overflowing with milk, honey, gold, and spices, similarly excited the European desire for economic domination, and the search for his paradise-on-earth became a direct motivation for exploration of the Indies.<sup>4</sup> However, by the 14<sup>th</sup> century, Europeans had failed to locate Prester John's kingdom in Asia. Concluding they had explored the wrong region due to a confusion of Ptolemaic nomenclature, Europeans shifted the topos to the African continent, exploiting the paradise motif's innate portability in response to changing geographical knowledge (see Figure 3).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Otto von Freisingen, Bishop of Freising, records in *Historia de Duabus Civitatibus* (1158) that the Bishop Hugh of Jabala told the Pope about Presbyter Johannes a Christian priest and king whose paradisaical kingdom was in the extreme Orient, beyond Persia and Armenia, guarded by walls of flame. See *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville* for a description of Prester John's Christian kingdom in all its diverse riches and marvels (167-72).

<sup>4</sup> Prester John's realm was represented in medieval imagery as Paradise itself. According to his apocryphal *Epistola*, his land "streams with honey and is overflowing with milk. In one region grows no poisonous herb...no scorpion exists, nor does the serpent glide through the grass, nor can any poisonous animals exist in it or injure anyone" (cited in Relaño "Paradise" 3). The river from Paradise which irrigates his domain flows with emeralds, sapphires, topazes, and a host of precious stones, while gold, silver, spices, and marvellous creatures, including Pygmies, Giants, and Cyclops, are to be found throughout his realm (Relaño 3).

<sup>5</sup> The Ptolemaic world map whereby Asia designated both the East and Africa.





Figure 3: Sebastian Cabot's 1544 map of Africa portrays Prester John's mythical Christian kingdom in the uncharted heart of Africa, signified by a king bearing a cross



The earliest printed maps depict Prester John's kingdom in Africa, bounded by impenetrable mountains and marvellous creatures—black African kings, diminutive pygmies, dog-headed people—and often portray his paradise-on-earth as bordering the infernal land of Gog and Magog, demonic figures deriving from both the Christian and Islamic religious imaginaries. The Qu'ranic legend of Dhul Qurnain describes how Iskander the Conqueror built a great wall to encircle Gog and Magog and prevent them from overrunning the civilized world.<sup>6</sup> Each culture, Christian and Islamic, translated Gog and Magog to stand for the perceived material and spiritual enemies of their civilization: whether the Muslim Saracen or the Christian infidel.<sup>7</sup> The search for Prester John's kingdom motivated Portuguese exploration of the African coasts much in the way that belief in the earthly paradise inspired Christopher Columbus's journeys to the West Indies. Navigators from Prince Henry to Pedro Alvarez Cabral carried letters addressed to Prester John from the king of Portugal, who hoped to establish a Christian alliance against the Islamic empire and to gain access to Prester John's immense riches. Failing to locate Prester John in West Africa, the Portuguese set their hopes on East Africa. In 1497, Portuguese navigator Vasco da Gama rounded the Cape of Good Hope and "discovered" the Swahili islands of East Africa, thus mapping the edges of the "blank" sub-equatorial continent. The Christian kingdom of Abyssinia was heralded as Prester John's, and when envoys of the king of Ethiopia visited the court of King Manuel I of Portugal in 1514, they were mistaken as Prester John's emissaries (Lawrance 306).

Like the Spanish in South America, the Portuguese sought cities of gold, cities of God in Africa, wedding economic exploitation to Catholic mission. In 1495, Moseen Taime Teener, a Catalonian lapidary, wrote to Christopher Columbus: "So long as your Excellency does not find black men, you must not look for great things, real treasures, such as spices, diamonds and gold" (cited in Humboldt

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<sup>6</sup>Should Gog and Magog breach the wall, their reappearance is meant to signify the apocalypse.

<sup>7</sup> Gog and Magog are first mentioned in the Old Testament as giants, but later reappeared in medieval texts in reference to China and Mongolia. With the growth of the Ottoman empire, the signified changed again and Gog and Magog came to be associated with the Ottomans. Edward Graham has analyzed China's historical construction of a "barbarian Other" excluded from Chinese civilization, literally held back by a Great Wall, as representing an "imaginative geography" which shows that Said's concept of "otherism as a cultural artifact" does not apply only to Western perceptions of Asia (cited in Bagchi 20).



“Fluctuations” 4). In the 14<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> centuries, tropical heat, equatorial geography, and remote distance were the imagined geographical markers of “gold-land,” and the literature of Portuguese discovery and exploration resounds with tropes of Africa as a treasure-house. In West Africa, conquistadors pursued the semi-mythic “gold of the Sudan,” and built the fort of Elmina to secure their presence near the Volta River, where gold was mined by indigenous peoples. Misinterpreting the ornaments adorning the Ashanti kings as indicating an abundance of gold, the Portuguese named the region the “Gold Coast” and plundered the native tribes to ship gold back to Europe. Unable to compete with the sheer quantity and price of the gold flowing in from Spanish America, their trade soon dwindled. However, the Gold Coast’s failure to fulfil Portuguese expectations of golden excess did not result in the abandonment of gold-land as a topos inflaming the colonial imagination. Instead, the rounding of the Cape resulted in the condensation of the ambivalent myth of “an infernal Africa of the west and a paradisiacal Africa of the east that had dominated speculation about the continent since Homer’s *Odyssey*” (Gray 23). Furthermore, “as empirical knowledge of east Africa disappointed hopes, so the paradise migrated ever farther south” (Gray 23).

In East Africa, tantalizing rumours of the gold-mines of the “The Symbae” spurred the mythologization of the interior as Solomon’s city of gold, Ophir, or Prester John’s lost kingdom.<sup>8</sup> In *Decadas da Asia* (1552), João de Barros reports the discovery of ancient mines and cities in southeast Africa “very similar to some which are found in the land of Prester John,” while João dos Santos’ *Ethiopia Oriental* (1609) fantasizes that Zimbabwe was the true location of Ophir (cited in Hall 184). Driven by avarice, the Portuguese fortified the coastal ports of Kilwa, Sofala, Moçambique, and Mombasa and seized the Swahili trading posts of Zanzibar, Sena, and Tete, attempting to crush the Swahili trade monopoly and force the ruler of the Mutapa state, the Monomotapa, to cede control of the gold-mines directly to them. However, like the Spanish expeditions in search of El Dorado, Portuguese incursions into the interior failed to locate the excess which they so craved or to establish uncontested dominance. Conquistadors died from

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<sup>8</sup> “Symbae” is the Portuguese rendition of the indigenous African name for the ancient capital of Zimbabwe. The real-life city achieved a mythical resonance in Portuguese descriptions of its putative riches.

disease on the “fever coast” and perished in the Swahili uprisings led by Ali Bey, the Omani-aided revolts in the city-states, the rebellion of the Shona, the invasion of the Cangamires, and the siege of Fort Jesus. The Mutapa miners fled the region, burying the mines to prevent them from falling into Portuguese hands.

Confronted by these resistances, the Portuguese imaginary gave rise to the myth of Africa as plagued by barbarians and dark forces preventing the advance of civilization and the discovery of gold-lands. The fantasy of the “tropical treasure house” was accompanied by dread of the “white man’s grave” (Mudimbe “Invention” 20). Thus, Barros imagines disease as divinely reciprocating upon would-be conquerors of a forbidden paradise, revealing not only the conquistadors’ physical suffering, but their submerged sense of guilt:

It seems that for our sins, for some inscrutable judgment of God, in all the entrances of this great Ethiopia that we sail along, he has placed a striking angel with a flaming sword of deadly fevers, who prevents us from penetrating into the interior to the springs of this garden, whence proceed rivers of gold that flow to the sea in so many parts of our conquest. (Pratt 69)<sup>9</sup>

This figuring of Africa as an anti-paradise combining objects of desire with feverish reality is characteristic of European literature about the tropics, which promotes a dualist conception of Africa as simultaneously “pestilential” and “paradisiacal” (Arnold 7). Landscapes of seeming abundance and fertility are also paradoxically landscapes of poverty and disease, threatening “primitive violence and destruction” and “the detrimental effect of tropical abundance on the moral physical well-being of human inhabitants” (Arnold 8). Africa’s mythic gold-lands function as landscapes of European desire, “lands of promise” whose illusory riches are destructive and whose appearance of tropical exuberance conceals “a desert, covered with verdure” (Arnold 16).

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<sup>9</sup> A passage in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899) uncannily echoes Barros’ 16<sup>th</sup>-century description of the Portuguese incursion, when Marlow describes sailing down the Gold Coast and represents Africa as infernal, feverish, and reciprocating the violence of the French gunship: “I heard the men in that lonely ship were dying of fever at the rate of three a day... We called at some more places with farcical names, where the merry dance of death and trade goes on in a still and earthy atmosphere as of an overheated catacomb; all along the formless coast bordered by dangerous surf, as if Nature herself had tried to ward off intruders; in and out of rivers, streams of death in life, whose banks were rotting into mud, whose waters thickened into slime” (Conrad 14).



Two decades after Barros' account of being barred from the paradisiacal interior, Luís Vaz de Camões finished his national epic celebrating the Portuguese rounding of the Cape, *The Lusiads* (1572), in which the valiant Vasco da Gama is rewarded with an island paradise off the coast of East Africa. Gama sights the same constellation of the Southern Cross as Dante and is likewise awed by the blank, unbounded continent: "Nor pilot knows if bounding shores are plac'd/Or if one dready sea o'erflow the lonely waste" (cited in Pechey 10). This impression of blankness is overcome after Gama survives the purgatory of the Cape of Storms and the giant Adamastor's attempts to overthrow the vessel. Emerging triumphant on the other side, Gama immediately begins to "map" East Africa, "discovering" fabulous islands and coastlines. Camões' epic signposts the reorientation of Africa's geography in the European imagination. The old "T-O" maps, in which the world seemed to radiate from the intersection of heaven and earth in Jerusalem, were abandoned for new maps oriented towards the north, with the territories that deployed sea-power at the top. In this new implied hierarchy, "Africa took up its accustomed place in the middle of the lower half of the great body of the world" and "in the course of time the inhabitants of Africa were told by their conquerors the name of their own continent" (Pechey 11).

*The Lusiads* reconfigures Dante's conception of Africa as a metaphysical terrain at the bottom of the world in the terms of newly acquired Portuguese geographical knowledge. Camões' "Adamastor topos" borrows from Dante's description in the *Inferno* of "the Titan around the inner circle of the nether Hell" who "guards the transit to the southern paradise" (Pechey 23). The paradisiacal culmination of the epic, where da Gama and his men make ecstatic love with nymphs on the Island of Love, irreverently parodies Dante's progression from Purgatorio to Paradiso (Pechey 23). Camões' explorers are rewarded not with spiritual repatriation to the heavenly realm, but with an orgy of consummation of their desire for the Other, recalling the copulating bodies in the artificial paradise of Bosch. Critics have deemed this conclusion incongruously "wanton" (Atkinson 24); however, such mystified eroticism is entirely predictable from a triumphalist imperial narrative which converts the spiritual vision of Dante's *Commedia* into a secular vision of conquest as desire, figured in terms of sex: "Achieve," declares the goddess

Tethys, “And the Island of Venus will be yours” (Camões 217). Camões’ adaptation of Dante marks a significant feature of paradise discourse in Africa: when Africa is imagined as paradisaic, rather than infernal, it is only in material, physical terms, as a playground for merchant adventurers or a carnal Garden of Eden, never as a spiritual realm.

In Tethys’ exposition of the “magic globe,” Camões situates the Island of Love as only one amongst many islands which the Portuguese will conquer in the future, including Borneo, Ceylon, Madagascar, and the Swahili islands. Evoking Africa through the twin tropes of “gold-land” and “blank darkness,” Tethys exhorts the Portuguese to make the continent’s raw resources the cornerstone of future imperial ventures:

Here is Africa, still grasping after the things of this world, uncivilized, full of savagery... Look out over the whole vast continent and see how everywhere it is the home of legions of infidels... Observe...the great empire of Benomotapa with its naked blacks... There is abundance of gold, the metal that men most strive after, in this as yet unknown hemisphere. (Camões 236)

As she finishes her speech, the sun sinks “to its setting in the farthest west, where ocean laps the shores of Mexico” (236), thus linking the conquered paradise of the Americas to Africa, the “new” unconquered world.<sup>10</sup> Barred from the conquest of South America by the Treaty of Tordesillas, the Portuguese must make the most of Africa and India.<sup>11</sup> Camões’ epic generates an imperial fantasy of Portugal’s providential destiny to discover great wealth in new worlds and to spread the true light of faith. In a postscript, Camões urges the king of Portugal to pursue the twin mission of crusade and conquest and fulfil Tethys’ predictions of imperial glory.<sup>12</sup> The continued desire for African gold-lands, therefore, wins out over Barros’s pessimistic trope of retributive pestilence, although Portugal’s attempts

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<sup>10</sup> Atkinson repeats this association in his introduction to *The Lusiads*: “As the curtain lifted upon ever new horizons—new lands, new oceans, new continents, new peoples...even the stay-at-home was awed to silence, as upon a peak in Darien, at the wonder of it all” (27).

<sup>11</sup> In *Under Western Eyes*, Balachandra Rajan relocates *The Lusiads* in relation to Portuguese imperial desires for Asia, controverting earlier critical interpretations which tended to focus on its European and national epic legacies.

<sup>12</sup> The epic was written in the context of Portugal’s crusade against the Moors. The poet incites the young Portuguese king to go to Africa in conquest and to destroy the power of Islam.





“imperial eyes” and echoing the conquering gaze of the 15<sup>th</sup>-century conquistadors.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, the archetypal image of the imperial overseer surveying his realm-to-be predicts Keats’ portrayal of Cortés’ “wild surmise” on the peak of Darien. In emphasizing the imagined riches of the cities, Milton links man’s eviction from the earthly paradise to the longing to create empires and exploit their wealth. Africa is invoked again at the moment of Adam and Eve’s expulsion from paradise, fixing the temperance of the Eden now lost in comparison to the violent heat of Libya:

The brandished sword of God before them blazed  
Fierce as a comet; which with torrid heat,  
And vapor as the Libyan air adust,  
Began to parch that temperate clime (12. lines 633-6)

Africa once more becomes the feverish, purgatorial terrain suspended on the borders of the fallen paradise, the space in which Adam and Eve must endure life’s sufferings until they are taken up to heaven. However, worldly dominion is offered as a consolation prize for their loss: “Some natural tears they dropped, but wiped them soon; /The world was all before them, where to choose/Their place of rest, and Providence their guide” (12. lines 641-7). European discoverers capitalized on their Adamic right to dominate the earth, invoking providence as ordaining their “choice” of worlds to conquer. Yet the uncanny similarity between Adam and Lucifer, whom himself “went forth boldly to seek new worlds,” introduces a tension between the will to conquer and possess and the quest mandated by divine providence. In the next section, I will explore how the fluctuation between desire for paradisaal riches and dread of the infernal continent intensifies in the literature of 19<sup>th</sup>-century British imperialism in Africa.

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<sup>15</sup> Significantly, Eve lies sleeping while Adam’s manly survey takes place, suggesting that she has no place in the imperial project of reclaiming the world outside the paradise lost, except to maintain the domestic space, the “place of rest.”



## Ophir Darkening: The British Imagination of Africa in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century

“O restless Fancy, whither wouldst thou fare?  
Here are brave pinions that shall take thee far—  
... ships of red Ceylon;  
Slim-masted lovers of the blue Azores!  
'Tis but an instant hence to Zanzibar”

- Thomas Bailey Aldrich, “Outward Bound” (1895)

“We had fed the heart on fantasies,  
the heart’s grown brutal from the fare”

- W.B. Yeats, “Meditations in Time of Civil War” (1923)

Since Roman times Africa had been represented not only as a space “swarming with barbaric forms on the outer rim of the world,” but as a “place of radiant wealth and civilization tinted with a sheen of sensuous possibility” (Hall 181-2). While 18<sup>th</sup>-century narratives governed by the stereotypes of the slave-trade predominantly portrayed a continent “overspread with misery,” an empty landscape of “burning deserts, rivers and torrents” (Pratt 70), in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century a new image of a heavily-populated interior of commercial networks and markets for British goods began to emerge. The British turned to Africa as a source of raw materials to feed the Industrial Revolution, just as they had searched for raw human labour to feed the colonial plantation economies two centuries early (Hochschild 4). The central regions of the continent promised a tantalizing abundance of minerals, jewels, metals, and savannahs watered by immense rivers, an image of paradisaal fertility in sharp contrast to later Victorian views of the interior as empty, savage, and dark (Heffernan 206). Recognizing the need to map the vast African trading system in order to bring it under the control of European commerce, British geographers became preoccupied with “fixing” the positions of its central nodes of affluence (Heffernan 206). In travel writing, 17<sup>th</sup>-century interest in the Americas and 18<sup>th</sup>-century fascination with Asia gave way to an obsession with the African interior, mirroring the progress of British empirical knowledge (White “Adventure” 9-10). Africa was a gold-land which Europeans longed to mine, both literally and discursively, filling a need in literature “for

something outside itself on which to form its discourse, a need for raw materials to be fashioned and reworked” (Miller 248). Consumed by the search for “lost cities” and “gold-lands” from Timbuktu to Ophir, 19<sup>th</sup>-century British writers produced fiction, poetry, and travel narratives avariciously obsessed with Africa’s potential riches.

Located at the junction of the Sahara and the Niger, where sub-Saharan caravans met to buy gold, salt and slaves from the riverboat traders of West Africa, Timbuktu was the central entrepôt of the Kingdom of Mali and the major source of gold for medieval Europe. The mythology surrounding the “mystick” “city of the golden roofs” in the “lion-haunted inland” originated in classical descriptions by Herodotus, Ptolemy, and Ibn Battuta, the 14<sup>th</sup>-century Arab geographer, but intensified throughout the Renaissance, whetted by Leo Africanus’ hyperbolic report of emperor Mansa Musa’s 1324 pilgrimage from Timbuktu to Mecca: “The rich king of Tombuto hath many plates and sceptres of gold, some whereof weigh 1300 pounds” (cited in Moore 415). In Cairo, Musa distributed so much gold that the Egyptian market crashed, birthing the legend of the “wealth of the Soudan.” For late 18<sup>th</sup>-century Europeans, the great desert metropolis, secreted behind a sea, signalled not only untold riches, but mysterious remoteness. However, this romantic myth downplayed the city’s reputation in the Islamic world as a spiritual centre of religious scholarship and culture, emphasizing its material riches. The rise of European Romanticism and Enlightenment science mingled with literary interest in the site, spawning a “Timbuctoo craze” between the 1770s-1830s (Heffernan 206). Dozens of European explorers raced to find the fabled city, many dying in the attempt.<sup>16</sup> In 1828, French explorer René-Auguste Caillié became the first European to visit the “mysterious city” and survive to tell the tale. He was bitterly disappointed to discover “a mass of ill-looking houses, built of earth,” a city made of mud, not gold (Caillié 49). Instead of exotic grandeur, he found an ancient intersection of trade routes, “created solely by the wants of commerce, and destitute of every natural resource except its accidental position as a place of exchange affords” (Caillié 56).

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<sup>16</sup> Scotsman Mungo Park died on the Niger in 1810 without reaching Timbuktu; in 1826, the Scottish explorer, A.C. Laing arrived in the city, but was murdered soon after.



Written a year after Caillié's return, Alfred Tennyson's early poem "Timbuctoo" (1829) captures the ambivalent British response to the discovery. Imitating Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Tennyson's narrator surveys the continent from the Rock of Gibraltar, the symbolic divide between Africa and "green Europe," and muses on the disappointed myths of "Divinest Atalantis, whom the waves/Have buried deep" and "Imperial Eldorado roof'd with gold" (lines 16, 22-24). Despite the catastrophe associated with pursuit of these spectres of limitless wealth and the geographical impossibility of their existence, they remain "Shadows to which, despite all shocks of Change...Men clung with yearning Hope which would not die" (26-7). For Tennyson's narrator, unexplored "Afric" offers the last hope of a fabulous gold-land, "a City as fair/As those which starr'd the night o' the elder World," yet even this "rumour of Timbuctoo" threatens to become "A dream as frail as those of ancient Time" (lines 57-61). Echoing Caillié's diary, Tennyson's poem mourns the collapse of the colonial imaginary of West Africa as a paradise in the face of empirical knowledge gathered by explorers and marks the "darkening" of Victorian discourse about Africans:

...I must render up this glorious home  
To keen Discovery: soon yon brilliant towers  
Shall darken with the waving of her wand;  
Darken, and shrink and shiver into huts,  
Black specks amid a waste of dreary sand,  
Low-built, mud-wall'd, Barbarian settlements.  
How chang'd from this fair City! (lines 236-245)

Yet the poem concludes by asserting the paramount importance of imagination to progress. Mirroring Milton's Michael, an Angel reprimands the narrator for fantasizing about paradises lost instead of imagining the future, and inspires the narrator with a vision of heaven's spires overlaid on the palimpsest of Timbuktu. Thus, Tennyson inscribes Africa's void with the new fantasy of the imperial project, implying that the gross pursuit of material riches will be replaced by the more spiritual vision of the civilizing mission—building castles in the air to replace barbarian settlements.

The pattern of collapse and renewal in Tennyson's poem mirrors the larger history

of “gold-lands” in Africa. After the first superficial vein of gold ran dry, the illusory riches of the Portuguese “Gold Coast” were replaced with the wealth of the slave trade. Like El Dorado, the mythic name came to conceal the mass exploitation of humans. With the collapse of the primary source of revenue after the abolition of the slave trade, the myth of gold-land underwent yet another transformation. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Ghana was colonized by the British and officially named “The Gold Coast,” preserving the paradisaical topos and relaying their intention to transform the colony into a peaceful showcase of the beneficial effects of British civilization: Tennyson’s heavenly future. Cocoa exports, timber, and diamonds became the new backbone of the economy, while Richard Burton urged the reorganization of the five working gold-mines and the importation of Chinese, coolies and “Zanzibar-men” to work this “old/new California.”<sup>17</sup> By the 1930s, the Gold Coast was the most prosperous colony in Africa, a prime example of the successful mining of both the country’s physical resources and its discursive, political significance. As West Africa was increasingly brought under colonial control, the fantasy of gold-land migrated eastwards and southwards as British explorers penetrated the “blank spaces” of the continent in search of mystical Ophir and the legendary source of the Nile, thus replicating the eastwards movement of the earlier Portuguese imaginary.

Conflating El Dorado with Barros’s “lost city” of “Symbaot,” the Victorians imagined Ophir as a city ruined by dark disaster—usually the invasion of barbarians—whose legacy of boundless treasures could only be re-located “by an appropriate custodian,” the imperial crusader.<sup>18</sup> In Rider Haggard’s *King Solomon’s Mines* (1885), Allen Quatermain hears rumours of a lost white city in the interior of southeast Africa “believed to be the Ophir of the Bible...an ancient civilization [of] treasures...long since lapsed into the darkest barbarism” (16).<sup>19</sup> It is left to Quatermain’s company to recover the lapsed paradise, journeying

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<sup>17</sup> See Burton’s preface to *To the Gold Coast for Gold* (1883), Vol 1.

<sup>18</sup> In the Pseudo-Callisthenes Romance, Alexander the Great is the ur-type of the wise conqueror, penetrating Asia and rediscovering the earthly paradise after passing through a “land of darkness” (Hall 187).

<sup>19</sup> The natives who ran the “wonderful mine of ‘bright stones’” of this great civilization allegedly “learned their art from white men” (Haggard 16). This is a recurrent theme in Haggard: in *Allen Quatermain* there is a “mysterious white race in the heart of darkness”; a white demigoddess rules a brown-skinned race in *She* (1887) and *Ayesha, the Return of She* (1905).



northwards from Rhodesia and undergoing purgatorial trials of desert heat and mountain cold until they reach the “promised land” in the interior (67).<sup>20</sup> Haggard maps the paradise of Kukuanaland as a female body, where the explorers enter between “Sheba’s breasts,” penetrate to the “vulva”-like mine, that “repository of fabulous wealth,” and emerge newborn from the “anus” of the cave of darkness (McClintock 1). Paradisiacal wealth and eroticism are conflated so that the adventurers achieve complete consummation: total penetration of absence and total gain of wealth. Their murder of Gagool and destruction of the mine mark the annihilation of the female paradise typical of the climax of the male conquest narrative.<sup>21</sup> Unperturbed by their destruction of Kukuanaland, the heroes return materially rich and spiritually regenerated. Haggard’s novel epitomizes a view of Africa as simultaneously a heart of darkness and a heart of “the lost light of civilization,”<sup>22</sup> into which the British explorer who is pure in body and wise in spirit will penetrate, redeem its hidden gold-land, and emerge again unscathed.

East Africa was one of the last places in Africa to be systematically colonized, partly because Omani Arab influence over the coasts dissuaded European incursions after the 17<sup>th</sup> century expulsion of the Portuguese. The “undiscovered” territories of Congo, Tanganyika, Kenya, and Uganda inflamed the European imagination because they were among the only remaining spaces where colonial explorers could construct the land as empty yet ripe for harvest. Conrad’s oft-cited “Geography and Some Explorers” (1926) frames the migration of imperial fantasies into the “white heart” of pre-colonial East Africa, where the “dull

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<sup>20</sup> Haggard’s heroes must, like Alexander, or the chaste Prester John, undergo purgatorial trials before they penetrate paradise, to ensure that they do not sexually regress: “Ethnography [offers] an understanding of the...dark forces of the past still buried in the personality of the civilized man...As representatives of civilization, Curtis, Good, and Quatermain undergo physical tests followed by physical temptations” (Hall 187).

<sup>21</sup> Ingrid Daemmrich distinguishes between “masculine” and “feminine” narratives of the quest for paradise. The masculine quest is characterized by the attempt to penetrate a paradisaic landscape which is signified as feminine through its sweetness, pleasant air, singing birds, nourishing orchards, and abundant foliage, as is Haggard’s Kukuanaland: “The soft air murmured through the foliage of the silver trees, doves cooed around, and bright-winged birds flashed like living gems from bough to bough. It was Paradise... The magic of the place combined with an overwhelming sense of dangers left behind, and of the promised land reached at last” (67). This fragile space is ravished and destroyed by the aggressive quester who retains his will to conquer.

<sup>22</sup> The myth of discovery and excavation persists into the 20<sup>th</sup> century as a master narrative organizing cultural politics in former African colonies. Martin Hall’s article, “The Legend of the Lost City,” traces the “Lost City” motif through a number of 20<sup>th</sup>-century South African novels, including John Buchan’s *Prester John* (1910) and Wilbur Smith’s *Sunbird* (1972).

imaginary wonders of the dark ages...were replaced by exciting spaces of white paper”:

My imagination could depict to itself there worthy, adventurous and devoted men, nibbling at the edges...conquering a bit of truth here and a bit of truth there, and sometimes swallowed up by the mystery their hearts were so persistently set on unveiling. The very latest geographical news that could have been whispered to me in my cradle was that of the expedition of Burton and Speke, the news of the existence of Tanganyika and of Victoria Nyanza.... (102)

The travel writing of 19<sup>th</sup>-century British explorers such as Richard Burton, John Hanning Speke, and Henry Morton Stanley performed a powerful discursive function, generating widespread public enthusiasm in Europe for imperial activity, constructing knowledge about the “blank” spaces of the map, and bringing back stories of an “untapped wealth” of ivory, rubber, and precious minerals.<sup>23</sup>

At the height of “exploration tourism,” the Zanzibar archipelago (comprising Unguja, Mafia, and Pemba) became the staging point for European expeditions into the interior, a “gateway to East Africa” where explorers, missionaries, and colonizers acquired slaves, guides, and provisions for their caravans. The semi-mythic reputation of Zanzibar, like Timbuktu, derived from its centuries-long history as an object of economic desire. Prior to systematic European colonization, it occupied a central position in the Indian Ocean world-system as a point of economic and cultural exchange between Indians, Arabs, Swahili and Bantu Africans. Powered by the dhow trade, the gold produced in ancient Zimbabwe was trafficked through Zanzibar, as well as the major commodities of the spice routes which eventually reached Europe. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, before the Heligoland treaty, the Zanzibar market provided crucial economic opportunities and stimuli to the industrialization of American and British textile production, as American, Indian and European producers competed to exchange cotton cloth for the East African commodities of ivory, cloves, ginger, cinnamon, and black pepper (Prestholdt 36).

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<sup>23</sup> See Richard Burton’s *First Footsteps in East Africa* (1856) and *Lake Regions of Equatorial Africa* (1860); John Hanning Speke’s *Journal of the Discovery of the Source of the Nile* (1863), and Henry Morton Stanley’s *Through the Dark Continent* (1878); *In Darkest Africa* (1890).



In Persian, Zanzibar derives from *zangh-bar*, or black-coast; however, in Arabic the name comes from *zayn za'l barr*, or “fair is the land.” In medieval cartography, it was designated part of the *Zanj*” the region in the Muslim division of the world corresponding to the third of the three Indies, where Prester John’s kingdom was alleged to be. *Zanj* meant black, or “land where the blacks dwelt,” thus demonstrating that for the Islamic world, as well as for the medieval European imagination, blackness was a synecdoche for Africa. The split between the island’s desirability and its “devilish” African inhabitants is an age-old polarity in representations of Zanzibar. Marco Polo’s 13<sup>th</sup>-century *Travels* emphasizes the monstrous blackness of the “idolatrous” peoples of the “large and splendid island”:

They are a big-built race...so stout and so large-limbed that they have the appearance of giants...They are quite black and go entirely naked except that they cover their private parts....They have big mouths and their noses are so flattened and their lips and eyes so big that they are horrible to look at. Anyone who saw them in another country would say that they were devils. (cited in Freeman-Grenville 25)

Polo had never actually seen Zanzibar; like Bosch, he exaggerates the signs of difference based on second hand descriptions of the “land of the *Zanj*” from Chinese and Arab medieval cartographers.

The potent dichotomy of fair land/black coast was adopted by the British and the Germans during the 19<sup>th</sup>-century “scramble for Africa” in order to represent Tanganyika as both an ivory-land of radiant wealth and as a fallen paradise swarming with barbaric blacks and depraved Arabs. The publication of travel narratives by Burton, Livingstone, Speke, and Stanley,<sup>24</sup> in addition to Burton’s heavily annotated, lascivious translation of *Arabian Nights* (1883-1885), triggered the fetishization of Zanzibar as the paradise of “spices, slaves and sands,” the “Green Jewel,” the “Baghdad of East Africa.” Burton’s allegations of the islanders’ promiscuity reinforced associations with the voluptuous East: “In my time, no honest Hindi Moslem would take his womenfolk to Zanzibar on account

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<sup>24</sup> See, for example, Burton’s *Zanzibar*, Vols I-II (1872); Livingstone’s *Last Journals* (1874).

of the huge attractions and enormous temptations there and thereby offered” (cited in Kabbani 51). Old medieval associations between aromatic substances and Eden further contributed to the lingering resonance of Zanzibar as a mysterious, semi-Islamic paradise. Soon after, the islands began appearing in 19<sup>th</sup>-century British poetry alongside such “exotic” locations as Ceylon and South America.<sup>25</sup> However, representations of Zanzibar grew in shrillness and negativity as imperial acquisitiveness intensified, increasingly stressing the “black coast” side of the dichotomy. Thus, Speke’s *Journey of Discovery of the Source of the Nile* (1863) emphasizes the “unhappy-looking men and women, all hideously black and ugly” in the Zanzibar slave market, somehow implying their hideous blackness is to blame for their enslavement (White 31). As the base for abolitionists such as Livingstone and Bishop Tozer, Zanzibar became the focal point of the mid-century transvaluation from abolitionism to imperialism.

The “myth of the dark continent” re-defined slavery as the offspring of tribal savagery and Arab depravity (Brantlinger “Victorians” 198). In 1505, the Portuguese explorer Dom Francisco D’Almeida had described Arabs as “infecting” East Africa: “The first foreign people whom the fame of this gold attracted to settle in the land of Zanguebar was a tribe of Arabs...From their entrance, like a slow plague they worked their way along the coast, occupying new towns” (cited in Freeman-Grenville 83). Victorian abolitionist discourse adapted the myths of Arab villainy and fallen Ophir to rationalize colonization as the only way to abolish the slave-trade and “enlighten” the continent. Alfred Domett’s “Livingstone” (1887) imagines East Africa as “Ophir’s coast once golden,” a paradise spoiled by “vampire-chiefs and robber-gangs perfidious” (lines 148, 135). The devotion of Livingstone’s “rough black followers” on their funeral march from “Afric’s heart to Zanzibar” convinces him that only the “blazing” light of the British civilizing mission can “loose Afric’s long rows of wretches strung beadlike for sale” (lines 16, 21, 136). Similarly, rather than

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<sup>25</sup> Andrew Lang’s essay, “Mr. Kipling’s Stories” (1891) registers the rise of the imperial exotic as a public commodity: “There has, indeed, arisen a taste for exotic literature: people have become alive to the strangeness and fascination of the world beyond the bounds of Europe and the United States. But that is only because men of imagination and literary skill have been the new conquerors—The Corteses and Balboas of India, Africa, Australia, Japan, and the isles of the Southern Seas. All such conquerors... have...seen new world for themselves; have gone out of the streets of the over-populated lands into the open air” (200).



lauding Zanzibar as an Orientalist paradise of Eastern spirituality, Henry Drummond's *Tropical Africa* (1888) denounces the island as "a cesspool of wickedness, Oriental in appearance, Mohammedan in its religion, Arabian in its morals...a fit capital for the Dark Continent" (cited in King 71). Literary fantasies about "vile" Zanzibar grew so prolific that Hilaire Belloc wrote a parody of the East African travel narrative. His mock epic "The Modern Traveller" (1898) satirically catalogues colonial clichés, from the moment of "discovery": "I thought the earth in terror shook/To feel its Conquerors land" (lines 60-61); to the depravity of Zanzibar: "Thou nest of Sultans full of guile/ Embracing Zanzibar the vile" (lines 42-43); to the illusory riches of the "Far Land of Ophir! Mined for gold/By lordly Solomon of old" (lines 19-20).

The intersection of Orientalist and Africanist imaginaries in Zanzibar and its strategic role in the Indian Ocean slave-trade offered rich material for the production of East Africa as fallen paradise in need of British redemption. Harry Johnston's *History of a Slave* (1889) grimly exposes the atrocities of the slave-trade in East Africa, puncturing fantasies of pastoral innocence, in order to advocate imperialist annexation as the only method of abolishing tribal savagery and forcing Muslim sheikhs to free black Africans (Brantlinger "Victorians" 191). In Johnston's logic, the British have a "moral" duty to colonize both the Omani Arabs and the nefarious tribes of the interior in order to halt the barbaric trade of humans. In 1890, the British fulfilled Johnston's desire, signing the Heligoland-Zanzibar Treaty which granted the German Empire the North Sea island of Heligoland, the Caprivi Strip in Namibia, and *carte blanche* to appropriate the coast of Dar-es-Salaam as the core of German Ostafrika, in exchange for the Wituland sultanate in Kenya, the territories necessary to building the East African railway, and total sovereignty over the Sultanate of Zanzibar.<sup>26</sup> Keen to limit German influence on the mainland, the British swiftly declared a protectorate over Zanzibar and launched the "Shortest War in History" (1896), bombarding Seyyid Khalid bin Bargash's palace until he ceded control of the state. The Sultan Hamoud bin Mohammed was subsequently installed as a comprador ruler.

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<sup>26</sup> In addition, the treaty established the German sphere of interest in German South-West Africa and settled the borders between German Togoland and the British Gold Coast Colony and German Cameroon and British Nigeria.

Downplaying their military and economic interest in Zanzibar, the British insisted the annexation had been accomplished solely in the interests of the abolition of the slave-trade, although Royal Naval anti-slave patrols turned a blind eye to Hamoud's personal trade in new slaves.<sup>27</sup> In "The Longest Reign" (1897), William John Courthope celebrates the British empire's new power to "Cleanse the foul taint from Niger's crimson waves/And free the fettered toil of Zanzibar" (lines 122-123).

As the Victorians tightened their hold on the continent at the end of the century, their discourse became more negative and prolific, masking the greed of the colonial enterprise. They projected their own darkest impulses onto Africans and imagined Africa as an inferno seething with cannibalism, witchcraft, and lewd sexual customs (Brantlinger "Victorians" 198). The utopian longings of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century<sup>28</sup> and the paradisaal expectations of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century gave way as one by one, Timbuktu, the Gold Coast, Ophir, and Zanzibar were stripped of their mystic promise and reduced to fallen paradises. Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) is the Ur-text of late Victorian representations of colonial Africa, the novel which crystallizes most powerfully the idea of Africa as a metaphysical terrain of darkness, an anti-paradise.<sup>29</sup> Conrad was among the stampede of explorers, fortune-hunters and trading companies in the "ivory-rush" to the Belgian Congo after the Berlin Conference. Appalled by the conditions of exploitation he witnessed, he described Belgian imperialism as "the vilest

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<sup>27</sup> In 1807 the British Parliament passed the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act, under which captains of slave ships could be fined for each slave transported. After the 1833 Slavery Abolition Act, which freed all slaves in the British Empire, the Royal Navy was used to suppress the slave-trade, mostly eradicating the Atlantic trade by the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. However, the Saharan and Indian Ocean trades continued and even increased as new sources of slaves became available. Ironically, conditions for slaves in the Indian Ocean Dhow passage became more severe after the British and French abolition of the slave trade, with dhow slavers making longer journeys to far northern ports in the attempt to escape detection by the anti-slave patrols (Alpers "Indian" 11).

<sup>28</sup> The Bulama Association, formed in 1791 under the initiative of Philip Beaver, a retired navy lieutenant, proposed that the island of Bulama, off the west coast of Africa, should be used for settlement, with the African natives hired as free labourers. However, the island, envisioned as a New Jerusalem, was eventually abandoned when it became 'pestilential,' invaded, like Bosch's "false paradise" by vermin and disease (Coleman 79). Similarly, in 1787 the first blacks were resettled in Sierra Leone, and in 1822, the republic of Liberia was officially established as the new "promised land" for freed African-Americans.

<sup>29</sup> See Chinua Achebe's famous critique of Conrad's representation of Africa "as a place where the wandering European may discover that the dark impulses and unspeakable appetites he has suppressed and forgotten through ages of civilization may spring into life again in answer to Africa's free and triumphant savagery" ("Hopes" 5-6).



scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience and geographical exploration” (Conrad 12). His description of a white officer accompanied by “an armed escort of lank Zanzibaris” (48) is a material trace of the Zanzibar mercenaries who were conscripted into the *Force Publique* to enforce Leopold’s “Rubber Terror,” the violent extraction of ivory and rubber from the Congolese natives. By naming his fictional company of trader-Pilgrims “The Eldorado Exploring Expedition” and attributing their desire “to tear treasure out of the bowels of the land” as having “no more moral purpose at the back of it than there is in burglars breaking into a safe” (31), Conrad aligns the 19<sup>th</sup>-century search for Africa’s “ivory-land” with the 16<sup>th</sup>-century Spanish quest for El Dorado, and strips both myths of their spiritual veneer of civilizing mission, revealing the crude hunger at their heart.

Conrad borrows the “epic machinery” of Dante and Virgil to represent the “infernal machinery” of colonization and exploitation, with Africa as Hades, the great river as Acheron and Styx, and the various stations along the river as the circles of the hell (Evans 218-9).<sup>30</sup> In the episode of the “grove of death,” Marlow invokes the *Commedia*, exclaiming “It seemed to me I had stepped into the gloomy circle of some Inferno” (44).<sup>31</sup> The inferno’s power to communicate the depravity of the colonial endeavour is powerful precisely because of its ironic distance from the failed paradise; it always carries the shadow of longing for paradise with it.<sup>32</sup> Marlow’s journey into the heart of the Congo is entangled with

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<sup>30</sup> T. Walter Herbert, justifying the colonization of the Marquesas, writes that Christianity supplies “the most powerful motives and the most effective machinery for originating and accomplishing the processes of civilization” (cited in White 25). When Dantean machinery is yoked to the imperial project it becomes infernal, resulting in violence towards those it means to “civilize.”

<sup>31</sup> The rules of location and mobility in Conrad’s inferno do not correspond to Dante’s ethical structure. Unlike Dante’s “fixed” damned, who committed their sins outside the inferno and are confined to specific circles, the Europeans are corrupted by their descent into Africa (Evans 221). Their travel deeper into the inferno reveals their innate depravity, the violence they carry within (Feder 12). By contrast, the blacks are already damned, static, soulless inhabitants, embodied only by the violence which the European imagination attributes to them. The bodies of Africans are figured as the tormented shades of the inferno, though these are presumably innocent, unlike Dante’s sinners, condemned only by the European’s perception of their imagined savagery: “Black shapes crouched, lay, clinging to the hearth, half coming out, half effaced within the dim light, in all the attitudes of pain, abandonment, and despair” (Conrad 17).

<sup>32</sup> For Amit Chaudhuri, Dante is integral to Conrad’s “infernal” vision of Africa: “Conrad did not advertise his debt to Dante as some of the other Modernists did, but, certainly, Dante’s Inferno helped to construct Africa as ‘a place of darkness’, a nether region of the imagination, Dante gave Conrad also the disengaged observer who moves, himself untouched, through the dark landscape, as Dante does in his own poem through Hell” (22).



the fate of imperial Britain and parallels Aeneas' descent to Hades during his initiation as leader of the Roman empire: "in the lower world [Aeneas] looks both into past and the future and...is told of the bloodshed and cruelty which are to weigh on the conscience of his nation—the cost of Rome's imperial hell" (Feder 182). Marlow condemns the "rapacious and pitiless folly" of Belgian colonization, but he also reinforces the British imperial project, commenting on the preponderance of British territories on the map of Africa, "There was a vast amount of red—good to see at any time, because one knows that some real work is done in there" (36). If Aeneas is fated to become the founder of Rome after emerging from Hades, Marlow emerges to tell the Lie, perpetuating faith in the colonial idea.

Conrad wrote appreciatively of the "civilizing work" of British explorers such as Livingstone, yet was disturbed by the disparity between their reported successes and the sordid realities of the colonies. *Heart of Darkness* is anti-paradisaal because of the ambivalence implied by Marlow's continued yearning for the ideal and by its formal structure, which predicts re-emergence from the underworld, whether into Virgil's brave new empire, or onto the shores of Dante's *Purgatorio*.<sup>33</sup> Conrad struggles to represent Marlow's nescience, his inability to comprehend Africa outside of the colonial imaginary,<sup>34</sup> yet his repressed guilt emerges through the infernalization of the African landscape and its subjects. The anti-paradise expresses the tension between Marlow's cherished ideal and the degeneration engendered by that ideal (White 2). In the next section, I will trace the formation of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century German colonial imaginary of East Africa, specifically in regards to the trope of Ophir.

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<sup>33</sup> Questers in religious narratives such as Dante's *The Divine Comedy* or John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* choose to humble themselves as pilgrims rather than emulate Alexander the Great. These pilgrims surrender to the "feminine" space of "connectedness, fluidity, simultaneity of position, and community" and shed "the masculine traits of adventure and conquest in order to become an instrument of divine will" (Daemmrich 2). As a parody of the "masculine" (con)quest romance grafted onto Dante's "feminine" mythopoesis, the novel's portrayal of annihilation (Kurtz's) and destruction (of African bodies and land) is all the more shocking because its Dantesque structure implies a surrender to virtue, not savagery.

<sup>34</sup> See Benita Parry's argument in "Narrating Imperialism" (2004) that Conrad's opaque, allusive, indirect language denote a failure of representation reflective of the apprehension of "overwhelming" realities that lie beyond the fiction's cognitive horizons. The text signposts the limitations of its comprehension of African cultures and subjectivities.



## An African El Dorado: German Colonial Fantasies of East Africa

“Green are the meadows, fertile; and in mirth  
Both men and herds live on this newest earth,  
Settled along the edges of a hill  
Raised by the peoples’ bold, industrious will.  
A veritable paradise inside.”

- Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust* (1832)

“Maskini ya Mirma!	Our poor Mrima coast!
Mdoitshi alivoingia	When the Germans invaded
Kwenda naye pigana	We fought them -
Tukumbukapo hulia	When we remember it, we weep.”

- “Vita vya Kwanza” or “The First War” (1891)

From the 16<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries, German literature demonstrated a sustained fascination not only with the Orient, but with the New World’s Southern hemisphere.<sup>35</sup> Revisionist scholars have disputed Edward Said’s proposition that Germany lacked “a protracted, sustained, national interest” in colonialism, countering that “it was precisely the lack of actual colonialism that created a pervasive desire for colonial possession...in the minds of many Germans” (Zantop 7).<sup>36</sup> Unlike other European colonial discourse, German colonial fantasies of South America were detached from praxis, and served not so much “as an ideological smokescreen or cover-up for colonial atrocities or transgressive desires” but rather as “*Handlungersatz*,” an imaginary testing ground for colonial action (Zantop 6). Yet, both Occidentalist and Orientalist fantasies contributed to the pseudo-scientific racist discourses and *Weltpolitik* of 19<sup>th</sup>-century imperial

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<sup>35</sup> Orientalism in German literature originated with Wolfram von Eschenbach’s *Parzival* (1210) with its conflation of Prester John, the Grail Myth, and intra-European conquest during the high Middle Ages; progressed to the “Enlightened Orientalism” of texts such as Lessing’s *Nathan the Wise* (1778) and Johann Herder’s *Ideas* (1784); evolved into the Romantic Orientalism of Friedrich Schlegel’s *On the Language and Wisdom of the Indians* (1808) and Goethe’s *West-East Divan* (1818); and carried onto the popular Orientalism of Karl May’s *Orientzyklus* (1888) (Koepnick 28). In *Colonial Fantasies* (1997), Suzanne Zantop has also demonstrated the existence of a body of German colonial fantasies about “all things South American,” manifested in travel collections, renditions and translations of reports, dramas, novels, ballets, *conquista* dramas and odes to Columbus which she argues constitutes a “German Occidentalism” (10).

<sup>36</sup> However Koepnick cautions that the postcolonial apparatus of Bhabha, Fanon, Spivak and Said, developed in response to British and French colonialism, may be too homogenous to “produce critical insight into the particular legacies of German colonialism in Africa,” which are characterized by “peculiar refractions and multiple displacements” (63, 29).

expansionism and 20<sup>th</sup>-century fascism in Germany (Koepnick 28).

At the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Africa was less popular than South America as an object of Germany's colonial desire because it was seen as inaccessible and unfeminine, precluding the sexual fantasies of "blissful appropriation" which the New World seemingly invited (Zantop 10). In *Taschenbuch der Reisen* (1809), geographer Eberhard August Wilhelm von Zimmermann elaborates the "major obstacles" dissuading German "penetration" of the African interior:

[Africa's] soil was burning hot, vast expanses were desert sand...The Negro, furthermore, was much more manly, much more violent than the West Indian: the continued bloody wars with his kin, the slave-trade he had been engaged in since way back, had transformed many of these nations under the burning sky into wild and cruel peoples...How different, how much more agreeable to the European were things in the West (cited in Zantop 11)

In comparison to the occult riches of Spanish America, Africa was often seen by Germans as impoverished, empty, "shut up," a vision crystallized in Georg Friedrich Hegel's famous characterization of the unconscious, history-less continent in *Philosophy of History* (1834). Yet, in the same passage, Hegel calls Africa "the Gold-land compressed within itself—the land of childhood" as if to imply beneath the "dark mantle of Night" lay untapped riches (Hegel 95).

Critical analysis of European discourse about Africa has largely dismissed the German colonial imaginary as marginal, insubstantial, or abstract, due to Germany's late unification as a nation-state, its failure to acquire an extensive colonial empire until late in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the brevity of its empire as a result of the redistribution of its colonies after WWI.<sup>37</sup> However, German writers commented on the imperial projects of other nations, contributed a scientific approach to the revision of theories developed by "foreign discoverers," and encouraged readers to participate in colonial fantasies as "armchair conquistadors." Scientific explorers like Carsten Niebuhr, Heinrich Barth, and

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<sup>37</sup> Another factor is the overwhelming concentration of German cultural and historical studies on the Holocaust, to the exclusion of other discourses. It was not until the 1990s that German literary critics began in earnest to examine German colonial discourse.



Georg Schweinfurth were instrumental in producing the European image of Africa, just as Alexander von Humboldt's monumental body of writing on Spanish America was vital to the creation of the European image of the Americas.<sup>38</sup> Sponsored by the British Foreign Office, Barth's *Travels and Discoveries in North and Central Africa* (1857) formed a canonical text of Victorian knowledge of Africa, and was quoted by such authorities as Darwin. Likewise, Schweinfurth's account of his expedition into the East African interior, *Im Herzen von Afrika* (1874) whetted the imperial appetite of King Leopold II of Belgium for the Congo's resources.<sup>39</sup>

As the 19<sup>th</sup> century progressed, sharp increases in the German population, a rise in unemployment after the 1873 financial crash, and the need for raw materials to fuel industrial expansion led to an increasing interest in Africa's potential gold-land and *Lebensraum*.<sup>40</sup> In "Ist die Welt Vergeben?" (1884), A. Fick refutes complaints from German settlers that "virgin territory" no longer exists by appealing to Africa: "Isn't it banal by now to warm up the old wife's tale of a partitioned world, at a time when a Heinrich Barth, a Livingstone, Stanley, Robert Flegel, Nachtigal, Rohlf, Buchner, Schweinfurth and others have shown a whole continent to be most promising territory for colonization?" (cited in Zantop 194). The abstract fantasies of South America became the cultural residue from which imperialist propagandists generated arguments in favour of large-scale colonial expansion in Africa. When Germany finally acquired African colonies, they eclipsed the realities of colonial administration. Even though Carl Peters in East Africa and Lothar von Trotha in South-West Africa perpetrated genocides and violently displaced native populations, "the *Koloniallegende* of the German as the

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<sup>38</sup> Humboldt's continued mythic significance and popularity in the German imagination is evinced by the runaway bestseller status in Germany of Austrian writer Daniel Kelhmann's *De Vermessung der Welt* (2005), a "gently comic" historical novel celebrating Alexander von Humboldt and Carl Friedrich Gauss' attempts to "measure the world."

<sup>39</sup> Schweinfurth's book was published in English as *The Heart of Africa* (1873). The title suggests a source of inspiration for Conrad, as do its contents, recounting his travels with a party of ivory dealers and his discovery of the river Welle, a tributary of the Congo. Like Humboldt in South America, Georg Schweinfurth produces scientific knowledge of the inhabitants and of the flora and fauna of Central and East Africa. (His scientific expedition was commissioned by the Humboldt-Stiftung of Berlin). He describes the cannibalism of the Mangbettu, and proved the existence of dwarf races in tropical Africa through his "discovery" of the pygmy Akka.

<sup>40</sup> See Viennese economist's Theodor Hertzka's *Freeland* (1891), a novel about a super-capitalist utopia located in colonial East Africa, which acquired societies of enthusiastic German supporters.

‘best colonizer and cultivator’ prevailed, colouring representations of Germany’s colonial past in novels and schoolbooks well into the 1950s and 60s” (Zantop 8).

Encompassing Burundi, Rwanda, and Tanganyika, the German colony in East Africa originated largely because of 28-year-old Carl Peters’ passion for colonialism, conceived during his studies in London. Determined to establish a German colony, Peters travelled through East Africa negotiating a series of duplicitous “treaties” persuading tribal chiefs to cede over 60,000 square miles of territory in exchange for German “protection.”<sup>41</sup> In 1884, Peters founded a private society for colonization, the *Deutsche Kolonial Gesellschaft*. Unlike Prince von Bülow who sought a “place in the sun” for Germany, Otto von Bismarck was initially reluctant to inaugurate a full-scale German colonial project in East Africa, distrusting the rapacious Peters and wary of overseas entanglements. However, pragmatically seizing the opportunity to keep the land from rival Great Britain, he persuaded Kaiser Wilhelm II to grant an imperial charter protecting Peters’ acquisitions (Connaughton 111). When the Sultan of Zanzibar protested, Bismarck trained the guns of five warships on his palace until he subsided. Nonetheless, between 1888-1890, Arab and Swahili merchants in Bagamayo and Kilwa rose against the Germans and drove them out of the coastal towns, while Africans led by Chief Mchemba mounted guerrilla resistances in the bush.<sup>42</sup> Bismarck sent in a military expedition to suppress the hostilities and protect the financial interests of German traders. The leader, Hermann von Wissman, formed a *Schutztruppe* of native *askaris* led by German officers and ordered the

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<sup>41</sup> Peters deliberately misinterpreted the nature of *shauri*, the ceremonies and rituals governing the inauguration of trade treaties between caravan traders and African chiefs. While the chiefs accepted his gifts—*hongo*—as diplomatic signs of his good intentions as a trader, he construed their acceptance as ratification of his colonial project and the treaties as the legitimizing basis for Germany’s colonial engagement (Pesek 402).

<sup>42</sup> G.L. Steer notes that the German occupation of East Africa was characterized by extraordinary resistance from indigenous and Swahili peoples and by extreme violence on the part of the Germans: “Between 1888 and 1898 the coastal Arabs and every native tribe of note, in the coastal zone and on the rim of the highlands, resisted with arms the German will to carve an Empire. In 1905 and 1906 even the peoples of the south and south-east...rose in rebellion [in] the mystical Maji-Maji movement” (252). The German suppression of the Maji-Maji rebellion was on par with the genocidal killing of the Herero people in South-West Africa (Steer 253). Frightened by the ‘supernatural’ fervor and courage of the rebels, who were united by their belief in a “magic ideology of resistance,” the Germans decided the rebellion could not be quelled by fighting on the fields (Smith “German” 106). Instead, they systematically crushed the people, burning villages and crops and massacring between 75,000 to 120,000 Africans (Smith “German” 107). Those who were not shot starved or were flogged to death.



bombardment of the coasts. Wissman's mission of "protection" soon metamorphosed "into full-blooded colonial conquest, inaugurating a decade of violence and slaughter of both Arab and indigenous peoples after which German rule had spread across Tanganyika" (Conte 248). Made chief administrator of north *Ostafrika*, Carl Peters displayed a grotesque appetite for brutality and became known across the Swahili coast as *Milkono wa Damu*—"The Man with Blood on His Hands."<sup>43</sup>

Peters' quasi-archaeological books, *King Solomon's Golden Ophir* (1899) and *The Eldorado of the Ancients* (1902), foreground the intersection of the fantasy of gold-land with Germany's hunger for raw materials: "At a time when, more than ever, there is great striving to discover the yellow metal in all the continents...the whereabouts of 'King Solomon's Mines' does not appeal to fancy alone" (3). For Peters, gold-land is so urgent a topos that it etymologically represents the whole of Africa: "Our present word Africa is nothing else but the Latin adjective form of the ancient root of Ophir" (84). Openly envious of the wealth of Britain's southern territories, Peters uses Ophir to argue for a more systematic German colonization of East Africa:

Where Sabaeans, Phoenicians and Jews unearthed their vast stores of gold, British colonial enterprise has proclaimed the gold-fields of Mashona-land and Manica-land. One thing remains yet to be done: the thorough exploration of ancient Ophir. Whoever leads the exploration, must command that wide range of knowledge, which alone can decipher such phases in the history of the human race. (116)

Emphasizing his own "rare power of perception" (117) he tries to secure his place as the wise explorer and replicates the racist myths of Karl Mauch, the German archaeologist who attested that Great Zimbabwe could not have been constructed by Africans but only by a civilized race of whites, descended from the North. Peters argues that the higher, fairer race which built Ophir has been overthrown by their former slaves: "We must look for Ophir in regions inhabited by less valorous

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<sup>43</sup> Eventually he was recalled to Berlin, where he was officially condemned for attacks on natives and dismissed from service, only to be exculpated by Kaiser Wilhelm and reclaimed as a hero by Hitler. Peters is idolized in the Nazi-era film, *Carl Peters* (1941), suggesting the complex paths by which the colonial imaginary nourished the imperial project, with Peters a particularly potent emblem of the desire for expansionism and the violence necessary to fulfil it.

racess” (55).<sup>44</sup> Peter’s elaborate pseudo-scientific construction of East Africa as Ophir legitimates German colonial violence against indigenous Africans, in the name of redeeming lost gold-lands from their infernal inhabitants.

The New World, with its promise of “hidden treasures,” was the first object of German colonial desire and remained a colonialist dream even after Germany’s acquisition of an African empire. It is no wonder that Ophir, the African equivalent of El Dorado, should feature so prominently in the imagination of Carl Peters; it is a translation of the American gold-land into an African gold-land. Through its coastal Arab culture, German *Ostafrika* also invoked the Orient, thus enabling the potent intersection of Orientalist, Occidentalist and Africanist fantasies. The colony was less profitable than British Kenya, primarily due to a failure to attract sufficient investment. Although laboratories, botanical gardens, and agriculture departments were established<sup>45</sup> and an export-oriented economy was inaugurated based on plantation cash crops (coffee, cotton, tobacco, tea and sisal), white settlement, raw materials extraction, and cultural dissemination remained minimal by comparison to British colonies (Bartolovich 174). Substantial fortunes were amassed by individual traders, but Ostafrika was financially drained by the millions of marks spent on railway infrastructure, administration, and suppression of rebellions. Yet, broad support for the colony continued because of its “significance as a tool of propaganda and cultural symbolism” and its value in securing Berlin’s place as an imperial *Weltstadt* equivalent to London or Paris (Bartolovich 175).

Ostafrika’s symbolic significance represented the intersection of colonial and imperial fantasies that peaked in the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Orientalists such as Max Freiherr von Oppenheim tried to mobilize Germany’s Muslim-African colonies in service of empire. Sent to Africa by the German Foreign

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<sup>44</sup> Mauch’s myth only began to be controverted by archaeologists after 1906. It remains compelling to neocolonial writers—see Hall’s analysis of Wilbur Smith’s *Sunbird* and the marketing rhetoric of South African tours. Smith’s *Sunbird* echoes the valorisation of the white discoverer, equating the discovery of Ophir with the discovery of the New World. “Feeling a little like Scott or bold Cortez,” the South African archaeologist enters the Lost City (Smith 113).

<sup>45</sup> The colonies literally served as laboratories where Africans became the subjects of therapeutic and pharmacological experiments deemed too dangerous for Germans, as in the case of Robert Koch’s trypanosomiasis research (1900-1914) in German East Africa (Eckart 69).



Office in 1896, Oppenheim developed “a large-scale scheme to use Pan-Islamism and jihad as weapons” against England, France and Russia (Hagen 148). The Islamic Orient came to be viewed as exploitable, rather than an Other to be suppressed.<sup>46</sup> Even though East African Arabs refused integration into a Pan-Islamic movement and consistently resisted German occupation, Ostafrika, with its high Muslim population, briefly acquired political value as a tool to be deployed against British Kenya: “It is possible that the world war will break out before the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire. Then...the Sick Man will raise himself for the last time to shout to Egypt, the Sudan, East Africa, Persia, Afghanistan, and India, War against England!” (Nauman cited in Hagen).<sup>47</sup> The abstract dimension of Orientalism—gathering knowledge in order to produce an image of the Islamic world and the German colonizer’s place in it—thereby coincided with the political praxis of the German empire.

The imaginary geographies which governed German colonial praxis in East Africa were reproduced by popular 19<sup>th</sup>-century Orientalist novelists such as Karl May.<sup>48</sup> “Fable of Sitara” in May’s fictionalized memoir, *My Life and Efforts* (1910) describes a metaphysical terrain comprised of an infernal lowland, a paradisaical highland, and a purgatorial no-man’s land.<sup>49</sup> The cultures of these regions are determined by their topographies. Jinnistan, the highland, is a white settler’s fantasy: “lofty, healthy...rich in natural gifts as well as the products of human efforts, a garden of Eden, a paradise...a promised land of...nobly spirited people” (1). In sharp contrast, Ardistan, the lowland, is a “hell” of swamps, “rich in

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<sup>46</sup> According to Gottfried Hagen, “Colonial powers with large Muslim populations,” particularly Britain, were considerably rattled “by this emerging political Islam, even more so when Germany seemed to seize it as a political weapon” (149).

<sup>47</sup> German journalist Friedrich Nauman cited in Gottfried Hagen’s “German Heralds of Holy War.”

<sup>48</sup> A prolific writer of adventure romances set in Africa, the Middle East and North America, May could be considered the German Rider Haggard, nourishing colonial fantasies of “Red Indians” and “desert romances.” As Nina Berman demonstrates in “Orientalism, Imperialism, and Nationalism,” the serial publication of May’s *Oriental Odyssey* (1881-1888) coincided with the increase in German informal colonial activity in North Africa and the mounting popular interest in the Orient, both as a threat and political resource. Unlike Haggard, who took a proprietary interest in the British Empire and travelled to the locations of his novels, Karl May was the prime example of an “armchair conquistador,” boasting that he portrayed foreign worlds through the sheer power of his imagination.

<sup>49</sup> May’s concluding question to the fable recalls Conrad’s reconfiguring of Africa as a metaphysical terrain representing the infernal self of the European: “Are not even hell and purgatory allegories to us...Where is a hell, if not in yourselves?”



poisonous plants and savage beasts.” Its degraded inhabitants “enjoy life in the morasses,” characterized by “deep spiritual darkness and the forbidden” (1). They are ruled by a race of “lazy,” “prosperous,” “cunning” exploiters, whose only power derives from their enslavement of lower races (2). If the swamp-dwellers epitomize the imagination of tribal Africans as barbarous savages, the weak despots correspond to the Orientalist myth of Arab rulers as depraved oppressors from whom German liberation would be welcome. Maerdistan, the third region, is a “frontier land” of jungle “labyrinths” (2). May’s fable allegorizes the colonizer’s journey from the coast to the highlands: any European desiring to settle Jinnistan must descend into infernal Ardistan, then undergo the purgatorial trials of tropical Maerdistan, before ascending to the highlands. The “Fable of Sitara” articulates “the preoccupation with the ordering of natural geographies and human topographies” which lay behind the “accumulation and differentiation of social space” at the heart of the German colonial imagination and imperialist project (Koepnick 65-6).

Such preoccupations resulted in the financial and ecological disasters of the German colonial administration, and legitimized the exercise of violence against indigenous peoples. Believing white Europeans were better farmers than Africans, German administrators restricted the growth of cash crops to European plantations, unlike on Zanzibar, where British emancipation preserved an Arab/Swahili class of clove planters (Sunseri 482). Although abolitionist rhetoric denouncing the Arab slave-trade had helped legitimize the German colonization of East Africa,<sup>50</sup> Germany did not legally abolish slavery in the colony, adopting a policy of slave ransoming, in which slaves who wished to end their bondage could be ransomed by German planters to work plantations for the duration of their contracts (Sunseri 483). The administration pacified the abolitionist lobby by arguing “that slavery was dying out gradually and slaves were determining their own rate of emancipation” (Sunseri 484). Guided by pre-formed topographical assumptions valorising the hill country, German colonial scientists and farmers were unable to reject abstract “knowledge” produced by colonial fantasies in

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<sup>50</sup> The German Anti-Slavery Lottery financed numerous expeditions in Ostafrika, including the 1890 commission of a steamship on Lake Nyassa to fight alleged slave hunters, an expedition led by Hermann von Wissman, by then the empire’s most popular explorer and conqueror (Pesek 395).



favour of empirical knowledge of the land. Colonizing the highland and mountain regions, they planted the wrong crops and suffered from rinderpest epidemics, droughts, and blight (Conte 249). When the colonial economy director, “Landwirt” Eick, inspected highland territory procured by Carl Peters in Kwai, he declared it “a true paradise for the German farmer,” “an African Switzerland” (cited in Conte 253). Driven by his irrational vision of the land’s fertility, Eick was determined to exploit its “illusory riches” by evicting its indigenous inhabitants.<sup>51</sup> Confiscating cattle and burning villages, German administrators spurred the migration of indigenous Africans to areas out of German colonial control (Conte 256). The occupation of the paradisaal landscape by white settlers was thereby justified by the fact of its “emptiness.”<sup>52</sup>

Ostafrika also achieved significance in the German imaginary as a “hunter’s paradise” teeming with lions, wildebeest, rhinos, and elephants. In the 1880s, the frontier for white hunters shifted from the game-exhausted veldts of South Africa to the “virgin” territories of East Africa (Gißibl 123). “Explorer tourism” gave way to “safari tourism” as aristocratic and bourgeois hunting elites began surging to Kilimanjaro and the Great Rift Valley in search of big game.<sup>53</sup> Keen to protect ivory, their most important export commodity, German administrators heeded warnings from scientific explorers such as George Schweinfurth that elephants were in danger of extermination and began implementing the first conservationist policies in Africa.<sup>54</sup> Wissman proposed the creation of game sanctuaries modelled on German hunting estates, “small paradises” which native Africans would be forbidden to enter and which would convey to visiting hunters the idealized image of German Africa as an “untamed wilderness” (cited in Gißibl 126). However, forest conservation policies impacted negatively on local tribes. Colonial

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<sup>51</sup> “From Eick’s distorted perspective, Kwai seemed not so much a sanctuary for local pastoral groups, as an environmentally ideal location for German agricultural exploitation” (Conte 253).

<sup>52</sup> A rhetoric common to white settler writing: see J.M. Coetzee’s *White Writing* (1988) and Abdulrazak Gurnah’s *Essays on African Writing* (1995).

<sup>53</sup> Nostalgic histories such as Thomas P. Ofcansky’s *Paradise Lost* (2002) and Brian Herne’s *White Hunters* (1999) continue to mourn the passing of “the great white hunter” and romanticize East Africa as a “sportsman’s paradise” in need of preservation, emphasizing the endangerment of its wildlife over its indigenous peoples and their attendant socio-economic problems.

<sup>54</sup> Ironically, the Germans failed to profit from their sanctuaries as much as the British, who imitated Wissman’s hunting regulations, but made theirs more favourable to wealthy sportsman, with the result that Kenya surpassed Tanzania as the “hunter’s playground” (Gißibl 129).

environmental praxis marked the origins of international wildlife preservation but was “irretrievably tainted with social and human injustice” (Rollins 187). A “chauvinist rhetoric of ecological excellence” functioned to legitimate Germany’s conquest and control of foreign territories well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Rollins 187).

Even after defeat in WWI and the loss of *Ostafrika*, German “fantasies of colonial restitution, of frustration and imperial aggression compensated for the humiliating loss and kept the ‘colonial idea’ alive” (Koepnick 63). Hitler declared his determination to regain Germany’s African colonies, while German cinema and visual culture from 1919-45 compiled “a considerably coherent inventory of imperial visions and African fantasies” (Koepnick 29).<sup>55</sup> With the cinematic reinvention of colonial “heroes” such as Heinrich Barth and Carl Peters, Ostafrika continued to function as Germany’s gold-land, a colonial imaginary to be discursively mined in order to support the imperial *Heimat*. In the next section, I will conclude by examining the image of Zanzibar from the Swahili perspective.

## “Pearl of the Indian Ocean”: Zanzibar and the Swahili Imaginary

“Ki na madoadoa ya zahabu	It’s full of golden stars
Waka si ya Mzungu,	Nor is it the work of a
ya Mwarabu	European, but an Arab.”

- Anonymous 19<sup>th</sup> c. Swahili poet

“Zumari ikipulizwa Zanzibar	When one pipes in Zanzibar
huchezahidi walioko maziwa makuu	They dance on the lakes.”

- 19<sup>th</sup> c. Swahili proverb

For centuries, Zanzibar occupied a paradisaal role in the Arab-Islamic imaginary, the eastern, Islamic equivalent to the Gold Coast, an ivory-land to that gold-land. It was the centre of a rich trade in cloves, rubber, ivory and gold, not to mention the “black ivory” of the slave-trade. The origins of Islam in the 7<sup>th</sup> century catalyzed an immense expansion of Arab enterprise. For 500 years, Persians and Arabs formed a vast trade network throughout the Indian Ocean, stretching down

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<sup>55</sup> See films like *Die Reiter von Deutsch-Ostafrika* (1933); *Kongo-Express* (1939) (Koepnick 29).



the coast of East Africa, north to India, and east to China. East African fishing villages and trading cities welcomed visiting merchants and thrived on their trade, building stone houses to symbolize their wealth and status. By the 12<sup>th</sup> century, mutual interdependence on trade, intermarriage of Africans with minority Muslims, and the subsequent infusion of native religions with Islam, had given rise to a distinct culture, predominantly African but with strong Arabic-Persian influences, called Swahili after “people of the coast.”

Amongst intrepid Arab adventurers like Ibn Battutah, the Swahili islands of Kilwa and Zanzibar gained a reputation for unsurpassed fairness.<sup>56</sup> The *Chronicle of Kilwa*, a 16<sup>th</sup>-century Swahili history, tells of a Persian merchant who sets sail with his six sons in seven ships across the Indian Ocean and settles the islands of Zanzibar and Pemba.<sup>57</sup> The “heroic” patriarch and his sons build the city of Kizimkazi on Zanzibar, and found six colonies, from which springs the trade empire.<sup>58</sup> Narratives of discovery and colonization such as the Sinbad tale, or the *Chronicle of Kilwa*, emphasize the moment of landing upon the island, and the subsequent infusion of barbaric territory with the civilizing qualities of the Arab city-state. They recall the importance of the narrative of discovery in the European imperial imagination of South America and East Africa and promote a myth emphasizing Arab origins, rather than fluid Swahili identity.

In *al'jaib*, the Arabic literature of marvels, East Africa's entrepôts were a source of wonder and romance. Like European travel narratives, *al'jaib* produced ethnological discourse about foreign lands and Others, with the number of books increasing in proportion to Arab domination and empirical knowledge (Kabbani 1-2). However, medieval Arab geographers, in contrast to European geographers,

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<sup>56</sup> In 1332, Ibn Battuta described Kilwa in his *Travels* as one of the most beautiful and best-constructed towns he had ever visited. The wealth of Kilwa, or Quiloa, was legendary in both the Islamic and Christian imagination.

<sup>57</sup> The *History of the City-state Kilwa Kisiwani* (1520) is one of the earliest known examples of East African literature. Written in Arabic, it is most likely based on an oral history centuries older.

<sup>58</sup> The narrative of heroic founding is a myth, since African towns existed on the Swahili islands prior to Muslim colonization. Kilwa sunk from its legendary status as the richest island in East Africa after a succession of 16<sup>th</sup>-century Portuguese and African invasions. Some Swahili histories claim hyperbolically that it was sacked in 1588 by the *Zimba*, African cannibals who literally devoured the inhabitants; others describe a disastrous earthquake. Irregardless, Kilwa's trade supremacy and control over Mafia diminished, and Zanzibar became the dominant trading port.



were more interested in the commodities of legendary islands than their potential monsters, cataloguing their fruits and natural resources in greater detail than their inhabitants (Tibbets 4). This “economic geography” was directly tied to the interests of Arab mercantilism and expansionism. Medieval nautical Indian Ocean folklore such as Buzrug Ibn Shahryar’s *Wonders of the Sea of India* (953) and the *Voyages of Sinbad* give the first specific details about the spice routes, mythologizing the discovery of the monsoon winds which enabled Arab traders to sail down the coasts of East Africa in only six months, thus enabling the foundation of their trade empire.<sup>59</sup> Islamic literature abounds with tales of voyages to islands of gold by those in search of treasure, whether material or spiritual, and the paradise motif is as mobile and unstable as in the European cartographical imagination. Zanzibar, sometimes called “Clove Island” or “Spice Island,” becomes conflated with the fabled island of Wâq al-wâq: an Islamic El Dorado abundant in gold, ebony, and fruit, allegedly named after the cry of the bird of paradise, “Wák-Wák.”<sup>60</sup> Descriptions of Wâq al-wâq in Arabic sources, including the tale of Hassan of Basra in *Arabian Nights*, shifted its location in accordance with the changing knowledge of Arab sailors, so that it moved from East Africa and “the land of zanjbar,” to Madagascar, to Ceylon, to Southeast Asia, thus prompting Richard Burton to conclude, “Like Ophir, Wák-Wák has wandered all over the world” (cited in Wallace 381).

In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Zanzibar was a gold-land greatly desired by Europeans and Arabs alike. After expelling the Portuguese from Muscat, the aggressive Omani dynasty set out to drive them from East Africa as well, and formed alliances with the rulers of the surviving Swahili towns (Gilbert 21). The Swahili coast offered

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<sup>59</sup> Chinese and Arab accounts included details of monsoon and spice routes, and were consumed eagerly, if belatedly, in the West, reinforcing the mystique of islands such as Zanzibar and Ceylon. Medieval Christian writers borrowed from Arabic accounts, as in the case of St. Brendan’s *Navigatio*, the medieval Celtic “Odyssey.” The *Navigatio*’s structure as a spiritual voyage in time and space is analogous to mystical Sufi writings: the Saint encounters such temptations and wonders as the Island of Joy, the Land of Women, the Isle of Sheep, and Birds of Paradise, all topoi original to Indian Ocean mirabilia literature. The Saint Brendan legend and other similar tales were written after monasteries in Cordova and Sicily made Latin translations of medieval nautical Indian Ocean literature (Aleem 1).

<sup>60</sup> The first written record of Mozambique by 10<sup>th</sup>-century Arab geographer Al-Mas’udi mentions a tribe of iron-using people called “Wak-Wak.” However, Mas’udi’s sober account was replaced by a host of fanciful legends in literary accounts: see Shahkat Toorawa’s “Wâq al-wâq” (2000). The island was reported to have been named for the cry of extraordinary bird-men, for the Wak-Wak, a sexualized tree of knowledge, or for a plant bearing naked, screaming women-fruit.



Omani colonizers the opportunity to create paradise-on-earth, firstly by converting the indigenous peoples to Islam, and secondly, through the establishment of privileged lifestyles at idyllic locations. They secured their influence and inaugurated a Swahili renaissance by creating harbours and city-states at Mogadishu, Malindi, Mombasa, Dar-es-Salaam, Zanzibar, and Kilwa. These became known as “garden cities,” where wealthy Arab merchants built grand houses with walled courtyards intended to recreate the Koranic paradise and signify their prowess. The Omani governors were resented by local inhabitants, but as fellow Muslims were more easily incorporated into social structures than the Portuguese (Gilbert 22). Under the Omanis, Zanzibar became a major outlet for slaves and ivory, feeding the demand for piano keys and the need for labour on the plantations of Oman and the French sugar islands (Gilbert 23). In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Busaidi dynasty led by Seyyid Said sought to consolidate the Omani empire and make Zanzibar the focus of East Africa trade. Under Said’s rule, Zanzibar became known as “The Pearl of the Indian Ocean.”

Yet, Zanzibar’s “fair” reputation depended on the labour of the slave populations who harvested the spices for which the islands were so famed. The walled gardens of the rich traders and plantation owners were artificial paradises whose beauty concealed an infernal history of exploitation. Although dwarfed by the Atlantic trade at its peak, the Indian Ocean slave-trade began earlier and lasted longer, fulfilling Arab, Portuguese, Dutch, French, and British demands for forced-labour at different moments in history, and serving mercantile, domestic, plantation, and mining economies.<sup>61</sup> East African coastal exports of slaves escalated to 800,000 in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, driven by the rise of spice and sugar plantations on the French, Swahili, and Mascarene islands (Lovejoy 57). Recent historiography has begun to reverse the “history of silence” surrounding the Indian Ocean slave-trade.<sup>62</sup> The

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<sup>61</sup> From 650-1930, an estimated 11.5 million African slaves were dispatched throughout the Muslim world (Segal 57). Slaves from East Africa were shipped throughout the Indian Ocean, forced to serve as sailors in Persia, pearl-divers in the Gulf, soldiers in the Omani army, labourers on the Mesopotamian salt-pans, and domestic slaves in the households of rich merchants. Women were frequently taken as sex slaves.

<sup>62</sup> See Edward Alpers’ *Ivory and Slaves in East Central Africa* (1975), Moses Nwulia’s *Britain and Slavery in East Africa* (1975), Frederick Cooper’s *Plantation Slavery on the East Coast of Africa* (1977), Abdul Sheriff’s *Slaves, Spices and Ivory in Zanzibar* (1987), Michael Pearson’s *Indian Ocean* (2003), Gwyn Campbell’s *The Structure of Slavery in Indian Ocean Africa and Asia* (2004), and Erik Gilbert’s *Dhows and the Colonial Economy of Zanzibar* (2004).

“other passage” consisted of three phases: the caravan from the interior, the seaborne passage to Zanzibar, Comoros, or Madagascar, and the longer oceanic transportation to the ports of Arabia, the Gulf, and the Cape. Slaves died from starvation and exhaustion on the march from the interior, and yet more died in the bellies of dhow ships, stacked together on bamboo decks so closely they could not move.<sup>63</sup> Survivors faced a lifetime of chattel slavery and hard labour, although Islamic slave-owners often treated their slaves more humanely than their Atlantic counterparts and were more ready to free them due to the Koran’s guarantee of paradise to any master who educated, freed, or married his slaves.

However, contrary to colonial historians who saw direct Arab influence in every aspect of East African urban culture, Arab-Islamic dominance was not a totalizing force. The relationship of the Swahili to the people of the coasts and the interior was not one of unmitigated exploitation, but rather a more fluid negotiation of ethnicity and social positioning. Most Arabs who settled on the coasts “lost their original culture and language and completely adopted Swahili culture” (Abdulraziz 8). A “dizzying array of identifying labels” characterized the social hierarchy of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Swahili culture, where ethnicity became a vehicle for distinguishing between the different groups which composed coastal towns. Established residents, recently settled immigrants, and new arrivals were ranked in terms of how indigenous (*wenyeji*) or how foreign (*wageni*) they were perceived to be: “‘Arabs’ (*Waarabu*) versus ‘Africans’ (*Waafrika*), people of the coast (*watu wa pwani*) versus people from inland regions (*watu wa bara*), freeborn (*waungwana*) versus those affiliated with slave or servile ancestry (*watumwa/washenzi*)” (Askew “Female” 71). The fluidity of these categories in which “internal and external boundaries constantly shift, and ethnicity has to be constantly redefined and reinvented” (Askew “Female” 74) were in direct contradiction to the rigidity of the hierarchies constructed by Germans and British in their “divide and rule” policies.

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<sup>63</sup> An estimated five out of every ten slaves died on the march out of interior (Farrant 13). Usually, Arabs or Swahili led the caravan, accompanied by dozens of porters and pagazi. Slaves who became weak or ill on the journey were tied to trees and left to be eaten by scavengers or rescued by kinsmen, or their skulls were smashed with a rifle butt. Portuguese slavers were far crueller, however, whipping slaves into rapid death marches. Beaches were frequently strewn with the corpses of slaves who had died before they could be transported by dhows (Farrant 13).



Originally notated in Arabic characters, Kiswahili draws its grammar from Bantu and its vocabulary from a mixture of African, Indian, Persian and Arabic languages. Swahili literature originated long before European colonial intervention, with the earliest history recorded in 1204. The elegant simplicity of Kiswahili, in which every vowel is sounded, possesses a rich capacity for rhyme and meter, and from early oral narratives, the literature flowered into religious poetry and epic verse. Histories of East African city-states appeared soon after the 16<sup>th</sup>-century Kilwa chronicle, followed by 17<sup>th</sup>-century moral “message” poems and 18<sup>th</sup>-century epics such as *Utendi wa Tambuka* (1728) and Sayyid Aidarusi’s *Hamziya* (1749). Influenced by Hadhrami verse, the Swahili epic tradition borrowed from the romantic traditions surrounding the Prophet Muhammad, improvising marvels and myths to satisfy their East African listeners and readers.<sup>64</sup> Up to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, poetry and orature were so integral to coastal culture that “poetic language was often an expressive mode of regular, social communication” (Arnold 141).

However, colonial contact intervened in the development of East African writing.<sup>65</sup> German administrators promoted German language education and the British insisted that Kiswahili be notated in Latin rather than Arabic script. Yet, Kiswahili resisted language imperialism, surviving as the *lingua franca* across East Africa and becoming “the school, administrative, military and business language of the colony” (Pike 232). Swahili oral narratives were recorded in Ostafrika by explorers and colonialists interested in producing knowledge about Africans.<sup>66</sup> Collectors acquired oral histories by writing down dictations from *Hafiz*, literate Swahilis capable of reciting the Koran from memory. In some cases, the original medieval manuscripts had been destroyed, but the narratives

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<sup>64</sup> The long-standing tradition of oratory persists to the present, particularly in the sung poetry, *Taraab*, of African-Islamic music, popular in Zanzibar and the coastal towns of Tanzania and Kenya. Contemporary Swahili poets continue the patterns of oral poetry in their own work.

<sup>65</sup> See Jan Blommaert’s “Ideology and Language in Tanzania” (1997) for a survey of criticism on the influence of colonial contact on the development of Swahili and Bantu writing in East Africa.

<sup>66</sup> Underscoring the difference between European understanding of historical accuracy and the more flexible historiography of the Swahil, Freeman-Grenville remarks, “The question arises of the value of these documents. They are not historical documents of an ordinary kind. Much of what they contain is perhaps mythical; some of it, however, is solid fact” (220).

were preserved in the prodigious memories of the *Hafiz*. The texts produced by these encounters were doubly mediated: the colonial scholars did not translate them accurately and often published them with “corrections,” while the poets dictating the histories often improvised rhetoric and adapted the narratives for the ears of the colonial officials.

When Carl Velten travelled to Ostafrika in 1888 to serve as Hermann von Wissman’s interpreter during the suppression of the Bushiri and Kilwa uprisings, he collected Swahili oral histories, later publishing them in Berlin.<sup>67</sup> The histories collected by Velten bristle with sarcastic eulogies to the Germans, as in “The History of Sudi,” which concludes: “Now our ruling sultan is the great German Bwana, and there is much trade...The whole country is now at peace, and all of us his subjects are grateful to the great German Sultan for his goodness to us” (cited in Freeman-Grenville 232). The exorbitant praise signifies a coerced display of admiration which should be read as subversively ironic, as in “The Ancient History of Dar-es Salaam,” where the poet proclaims, “Wissmani then came to Africa, to the coast of Bandar-es Salaam...We cannot praise him, for it would never be enough,” but then proceeds to narrate a list of Wissman’s recent exploits which expose the brutality of his suppression of Swahili resistance (cited in Freeman-Grenville 237).<sup>68</sup> In addition to the “Wissmani chronicles,” Swahili poets wrote poem after poem protesting the German coastal invasions and urging Swahili and Omanis to “work together” to “reject the German” (cited in Pike 208).

The autobiography of Hamed bin Mohammed, known as Tippu Tip, is another example of Swahili literature mediated by colonial contact. Tip was a powerful, wealthy Swahili merchant who ruled a vast commercial empire from the 1860s to

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<sup>67</sup> See Velten’s *Prosa and Poesie der Suaheli* (1907) and Harries’ *Swahili Prose Texts* (1965).

<sup>68</sup> The narrative continues: “Bwana Wissmani...wrote a letter and made an order, saying: ‘Among the people who do not agree with me, no one may associate with Hasan bin Omari; and he who does so...will suffer punishment from the government. [...] The people read this letter, but no one could capture him. So Bwana Wissmani sent his deputy Bwana Toroto to Kilwa with his soldiers [...] The Bwaan Foloma captured Hosan and Omari Mwenda and their followers, and brought them to Kilwa to be punished. [...] Bwana Veltini...realized that many Kilwa people had made common cause with Hasan bin Omari. Very many people were imprisoned. Wissmani sent Veltini, who came and spoke with Hasan bin Omari: ‘Do you do know that people cannot now rebel? Why are you making war? Who are you to come and fight us? Judge those things for yourself—but you will be killed.’ So they killed him by strangling” (Freeman-Grenville 237).



1890. Through cunning, arms and diplomacy, he established a near monopoly on the ivory trade in Tanganyika and the Congo.<sup>69</sup> His territory, half the size of Europe, was known as “the paradise of ivory” and inaugurated an “ivory fever” among European merchants envious of his success. The German explorer Heinrich Brode persuaded Tip to write down his life-story in Swahili, translating the final text and publishing it in a German Orientalist journal in 1903. Tip’s autobiography describes the expansion of the Omani Arab trade empire into the Tanganyikan interior, and provides a crucial historical record of Stanley’s, Cameron’s and Livingstone’s explorations from the perspective of an Afro-Arab.

In colonial rhetoric, Tip was frequently vilified as the epitome of the cruel Arab slaver.<sup>70</sup> Brode converts much of Tip’s autobiography to the third person and adds pejorative commentary impugning Tip’s version of events as “mostly somewhat boastfully compiled” (19). He is unable to accept the operation of an Afro-Arab historiography outside European epistemology: “The Arab never makes a good historian. Whoever reads our hero’s autobiography will feel that he suffers from the same prolixity as the chronicles cited at the outset of the oldest African history” (19). Brode appropriates Tip’s story to confirm Arab depravity and celebrate the German imperial mission: “The paths traced out by [Tip’s] blood-stained hand have supplied the framework for all the subsequent cartography of German East Africa and the Congo Free State. Thus a life-work of destruction has served to aid the advance of civilization” (132). Similarly, Charles Elliott, Consul-General of Zanzibar, translated Tip’s autobiography into English and used it to tar-brush Arabs and justify British “protection.”<sup>71</sup> However, powerful slave-traders like Tip were more unusual than colonial discourse suggests. After the

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<sup>69</sup> Swahili traders like Tip and Musa Muzuri fed the slave-market by promoting wars between tribal chiefs and maintained dominion over vast territories through the use of large guns. They carried hongo, a tax of beads or cloths to be paid to chiefs in exchange for safe passage through their region. If a chief proved violent or excessively greedy, punishment was swiftly unleashed. Tip would march through villages, burning and killing until an indemnity was paid (Farrant 20).

<sup>70</sup> See, for example, A.J. Swann’s *Fighting the Slave-hunters in Central Africa* (1910).

<sup>71</sup> See Elliott’s preface: “The disappearance of the Arabs from East and Central Africa can hardly give cause for regret....On the whole, they were merely a nation of slave-traders, without much dignity or romance, and illustrated the demoralizing effect of slavery on the slave-owner. In the towns on the coast, where they had plantations, and in the island of Zanzibar, cultivation was kept up by a wasteful profusion of slave labour; but they were careless of the interior. [...] Had they retained any considerable tract of country, such beneficial legislation as the abolition of the slave-trade, and the prohibition to import alcohol and weapons within a certain zone, would probably have proved impossible” (Brode v).



German seizure of Tanganyika, few caravans left for the interior other than those of landless Arabs.<sup>72</sup> These traders were chiefly ivory merchants “who entered what to Muslims was the vile trade of slave-dealing only when ivory was scarce” (Iliffe 47). Tippu Tip, while claiming to be Arab, had an African grandmother, and his autobiography abounds with complex negotiations between Omanis, Swahilis and Africans which upset colonial notions of “Arab” and “non-Arab.”

Recent historians have applauded Tip’s strategic intelligence, while censuring his participation in the slave-trade (Farrant 147). Tip predicted that the economic opening of the East African territories would go hand-in-hand with their political conquest. Recognizing the limits of his military resources, he decides “the most advantageous plan for the Arabs was to live at peace with the Europeans as long as they possibly could” (Brode 127). While he served as Vali in the Congo, a fragile peace held between the Sultan Barghash and the Europeans, but when he withdrew to Zanzibar, the peace shattered.<sup>73</sup> When the Sultan urges Tip to forsake the coast, “The Europeans want to take Zanzibar from me: how should I be able to keep the mainland?” (92), Tip is resigned: ‘When I heard these words I knew that it was all up with us’ (93). However, with startling foresight, he also heralds the end of colonial rule: “Justice will be done. The Europeans are throwing the Arabs out now, but they will be thrown out in turn” (cited in Farrant 148). Despite its mediation by Europeans, Tip’s eyewitness account disrupts the discursive logic of colonial travel narratives which aimed to possess the “blank” slate of African territory through imperial eyes. In truth, European explorers were dependent on Tip’s knowledge of abundant cultural practices and peoples of East Africa, and they were permitted to travel in his territories only under his military protection. Without the infrastructure of Arab and Indian firms and the *shauri* knowledge

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<sup>72</sup> Poor Arab traders could barely afford supplies, much less guns: “the only surviving account of a journey by an ordinary trader is a catalogue of violence and extortion which earned those who returned from Lake Tanganyika a total profit of a hundred pounds” (47).

<sup>73</sup> The Belgians tried to emasculate Arab opposition by making Tip a colonial official. He played a “double game” with the Germans and Belgians, accepting the appointment of Vali in the Congo in the attempt to preserve as much of the territory which he had formerly ruled as possible. Brode reports, “He was engaged at a monthly salary of £30, for which he was to pledge himself to hoist the Belgian flag and restrain his fellow-tribesmen from slave-hunting and other marauding. A European official was attached to him, who was to make regular reports to the King of the Belgians, and whose duty it was...to keep a watch on his supposed superior.” Tip allegedly accepted the offer with ‘his own peculiar blink, a sign with him of quick understanding’ (Brode 103).



gained from African guides, interpreters, porters, cooks, nurses, and pallbearers, European exploration tourism in the 1870s and 1880s could never have been so successful.<sup>74</sup> In the next chapter, I will demonstrate how Abdulrazak Gurnah uses the paradise motif to excavate the complex history of interactions between Arabs, Swahili, Africans, and Germans in pre-colonial Tanganyika and Zanzibar.

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<sup>74</sup> See Donald Simpson's *Dark Companions* (1975) for a longer study of African agency and participation in the new economy of European exploration-tourism. Of particular interest is Simpson's account of Yao Sidi Bombay, an Afro-Indian guide who was repeatedly hired by famous explorers, including John Hanning Speke, Henry Morton Stanley, and Vernon Lovett Cameron.

## Chapter 4

### Paradise Rejected: Swahili Histories and Economies in Abzulrazak Gurnah

“Wamekuja wazungu      The Europeans came  
Wameteta uzungu      They brought their modernity  
Wametuta kizingu      And made us dizzy”  
- 20<sup>th</sup> c. Swahili proverb

“Our politicians are promising us heaven on earth.”  
- Maulid M. Haj, *Sowing the Wind* (2001)

Contemporary Zanzibar is a microcosm of urgent global socio-political concerns—racial identity, ethnic conflict, political Islam—which offers “a valuable lesson in the intricacies of imagined community” and the specific racial rhetorical devices used to perpetuate political conflict (Myers 444-5). After the advent of British rule in 1890, the material wealth and political dominance of the Omani dynasty steadily eroded, with Indian financiers re-possessing many of their estates. Yet Omani and Indian minority elites continued to dominate the African majority population, nurtured by British colonial policies favouring a comprador class of “non-natives.” By separating out migrants from the African mainland, British colonialism fractured ethnicities which had previously been absorbed into Swahili or Shirazi identity, even in the years of slavery.<sup>1</sup> Colonial discourses of race and ethnicity obscured the structural inequalities separating the islands’ merchant elites and colonial overseers from the under-classes of slaves, peasants and workers (Myers 443), while abolition failed to alter underlying class structures, even exacerbated them.

During “The Time of Politics,” the period beginning in 1957 and leading to

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<sup>1</sup> Shirazis claimed descent from the ancient Persians and Arabs who settled the islands before the Portuguese, rather than from the new Omani dynasty, which they viewed as oppressive (Haj 78).



Independence in 1963, the racial and ethnic categories forged by colonialism became the driving agendas of the main political parties jostling for power: the Afro-Shirazi Party (ASP), an alliance of the Shirazi Association with the predominantly mainlander African Association; and the Zanzibar National Party (ZNP), progressive socialists uneasily allied with monarchists supporting the Sultanate (Myers 434). Favoring the ZNP, whose loyalty to Britain after independence seemed more certain, the colonial regime installed a coalition of the ZNP and the splinter-group ZPPP as the islands' first government, even though the ASP had earned 54% of the popular vote (Myers 434). In January 1964, long-simmering resentment against Omani domination erupted in an ASP-led coup, overthrowing Sultan Jamshid Abdullah's government and exacting violent retribution against ZNP and ZPPP supporters. No longer viewed as Swahili or Shirazi, but instead vilified as "Arab" or "Indian" exploiters, an estimated 5000 "Arabs" were massacred (Myers 434). Seizing credit for the "Revolution," Abeid Karume took office as President of Zanzibar. Under Karume's rule, the ASP adopted Julius Nyerere's term *Ujaama*, referencing a mythic past of communal harmony which they claimed the revolution had restored. Land and schools were nationalized, trade unions banned, and most businesses, buildings, farms, and plantations were confiscated by the state. The great Stone Town houses were subdivided and occupied by tenant families. In 1964, Tanganyika and Zanzibar merged into the United Republic of Tanzania, a union heralded by Nyerere as a step towards "African Unity."<sup>2</sup>

Yet Zanzibar pursued a different socialist agenda than the mainland, adopting an East German economic plan and nurturing Communist and Eastern bloc associations. In contrast to Nyerere's advocacy of an "African socialism" achieved without class struggle, Karume argued that Zanzibar's violent revolution allowed him to pursue "scientific" socialism. Haunted by fears of pro-Arab counter-revolution, he developed an East German-designed surveillance state of spies and informers, mail-opening, phone-tapping, random arrests, imprisonments, trials without judges, and summary executions (Askew "Sung" 22). Severe

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<sup>2</sup> After all, Nyerere claimed, the islands and the mainland were neighbours linked by geography, history, language, custom, culture and politics, which only an "accident" of imperial history had partitioned ("Freedom" 292).

censorship, restrictions on foreign journalists, and prohibitions on tourism and emigration concealed the state-sponsored violence from the outside world. Unlike Nyerere, Karume was a merchant seaman who had received little formal education and distrusted intellectuals. He actively undermined education to the extent that Zanzibar schools lost their overseas accreditation and literacy rates plummeted.

Under Karume, Zanzibar's economic condition was contradictory: producers of cloves, the main export, received artificially low payments for their crops from the state although clove prices were at an international high. Despite the smuggling which ensued, the government accumulated vast foreign reserves of cash.<sup>3</sup> So much land was devoted to clove plantations that the peasants could not grow subsistence crops of cassava and plantain, and starvation ensued across rural areas. Yet Karume refused to import food, arguing that Zanzibaris should become "self-reliant," and the shortages continued until his assassination in 1972 (Askew "Sung" 23). Despite his government's frequent exhortations to set aside ethnic and regional differences and embrace "Zanzibari" identity; Karume continued to politicize ethnicity, privileging mainland Africans over Zanzibar "Shirazi" Africans and those of Arab and Asian descent.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, he initiated "ethnic cleansing" campaigns, forcing Shirazis to sign documents denying their heritage and compelling Persian, Indian and Arab women to marry members of his Revolutionary Council in order to spawn a "new race" (Askew "Sung" 26-7). As a result, an estimated 10,000 people fled the islands in the revolution's first decade, along with a majority of Zanzibar's 20,000 Asians (Askew "Sung" 22). Since Karume's death and the election of his son, the transition to multi-partyism has exacerbated old ethnic, racial and class tensions, and elections still provoke violence and riots,<sup>5</sup> spurred by resentment at the erosion of Zanzibar's autonomy

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<sup>3</sup> These reserves were drained by the Revolutionary Government's obsession with implementing a socialistic aesthetic of progress in architecture and industry. All adult males from 18-50 were forced to participate in "voluntary labour" for "nation-building" projects, building modernist high-rise housing blocks on the Eastern German model (Askew "Sung" 23).

<sup>4</sup> Of Malawian descent himself, Karume celebrated his connection to mainland Africans.

<sup>5</sup> After the 2000 polls, some 30 people were killed in widespread riots. The opposition CUF has repeatedly complained that the governing CCM party fixes the vote. In the rigged 2005 elections, the post-revolutionary government declared the victory of incumbent President Amani Abeid Karume of the ruling *Chama Cha Mapinduzi*. His rival Seif Shariff Hamad from the Civic United Front was declared to have won 46.1 percent of the votes but refused to accept defeat. The dispute prompted clashes and generated lingering resentment about the CCM.



and by counter-revolutionary discourses which organize opposition around Arab identity and political Islam (Myers 432).

In mainland Tanzania, Julius Kambarage Nyerere, affectionately known as *Mwalimu*, or “Teacher,” officially led the nation for over twenty years. The Arusha Declaration of 1967 nationalized the principle means of production and exchange on behalf of Tanzanian peasants and workers and launched the start of *Ujaama* villageization, Africa’s largest forced-resettlement scheme, in which 10 million Tanzanians reluctantly moved into state-designed villages. Nyerere’s indigenized brand of socialism positioned itself against both Western individualism and Marxist-Leninist “scientific” socialism through its rhetoric of return to a proto-socialist past:<sup>6</sup>

‘Ujaama’ then, or ‘familyhood,’ describes our socialism. It is opposed to capitalism, which seeks to build a happy society on the basis of the exploitation of man by man; and it is equally opposed to doctrinaire socialism which seeks to build its happy society on a philosophy of inevitable conflict between man and man. (“Ujaama” 170)

Responding to the fragmentation and underdevelopment of Tanzania’s 120 ethnic groups by colonial divide-and-rule policies, Nyerere believed socialism should cultivate national unity, rather than further divisions (Askew “Sung” 18), and called for an extension of *familyhood* “beyond the tribe, the community, the nation, or even the continent to...the whole society of mankind” (“Ujaama” 171). Passionately committed to pan-Africanism and anti-colonial struggle, Nyerere offered refuge to liberation movements from across Africa, making Dar-es-Salaam a haven for African revolutionaries and political activists.

During the 1970s, Tanzania showed slow, steady economic growth and boasted the highest primary-school re-enrolments in Africa, a 90% literacy rate, and free national healthcare. However, in the 1980s, the country was stricken by a series of disasters—drought, oil crisis, falling agricultural prices, and war with Uganda’s

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<sup>6</sup> Because Tanzania had no Agrarian or Industrial Revolution, Nyerere argued that African socialism should be peaceful, rather than predicated on revolution, and argued that pre-colonial Africans did not even have “classes” (“Ujaama” 170). Furthermore, a devout Catholic, Nyerere insisted that African socialism should incorporate rather than reject indigenous spirituality.

Idi Amin—initiating economic decline, recurrent famine, and aid dependency. Nyerere staunchly refused IMF assistance and the conditions attached; however, after his resignation in 1985, President Ali Hassan Mwinyi signed IMF accords agreeing to dismantle the socialist platform through trade liberalization and privatization. During the reforms, corruption soared and parastatals were sold off in “mysterious transactions” to foreign investors, mostly white South Africans. Neo-liberal policies transformed Tanzania into a plunder-house for multinational corporations who flocked to its shores to extract super-profits in mining and tourism.<sup>7</sup> Structural adjustment introduced “wild capitalism,” the reappearance of previously-condemned forms of “rent-seeking behaviour” on a larger, uncontrolled scale, and President Mwinyi came to be known as *Mzee Ruksa*, “Mr. Permissiveness” (Askew “Sung” 30).

The rapid expansion of education and healthcare in the socialist era was followed by severe contraction in response to structural adjustments in the 1990s. By 1997, less than half of school-age children were enrolled in school and literacy rates had plummeted, due to World Bank and IMF mandates about the imposition of school fees, while Tanzanian health indicators had plunged to among the worst in the world, with a life expectancy of only forty-five years (Askew 31). As the increasing rate of urbanization brought waves of poor from the villages, unemployment rates rose to almost 50% in Dar-es-Salaam, so that “with their dreams of a decent job unrealized,” young men have been reduced to stealing and women to selling themselves (Haj 72). Yet, on his July 2006 tour of Tanzania, World Bank president Paul Wolfowitz praised the nation’s reforms and heralded it as Africa’s “next showpiece,” declaring “Everybody deserves a chance to have a better life, have their children go to school [and] educated to be healthy, and I hope that what we’re doing here together can help make this community better” (“Wolfowitz” par. 2).

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<sup>7</sup> See the Tanzania Gender Networking Programme’s “Press Statement on the Visit of World Bank President Paul Wolfowitz to Tanzania” (2006), in which they demand debt cancellation and declare the failure of neo-liberal macro-economic policies which allow MNCs to export almost all their profits overseas without paying taxes, to benefit from subsidized energy and water costs, and to pay excessively low wage rates: “A dollar that comes to Tanzania today siphons more than two in return which is unequal, unfair and unsustainable” (1).



## From Promised Land to Plunder-House: East African Writing in English and Kiswahili

Literature in East Africa reflects the ideological transitions between imperialism, nationalism, socialism and neo-liberalism.<sup>8</sup> Following a similar pattern to other postcolonial literatures, its first phase consisted mostly of works by settlers of European origin, such as Karen Blixen's *Out of Africa* (1937), Elspeth Huxley's *Red Stranger* (1939), and Margery Perham's *Major Dane's Garden* (1926). White settler writing perpetrates nostalgic, Edenic myths of Kenya and Tanganyika as the "hunter's paradise," the "Happy Valley," the "promised land." Huxley's *The Flame Trees of Thika* (1959) famously opens by describing her family's Kenyan coffee plantation as "a bit of El Dorado" (7) and continues by imagining East Africa as "a dreadful sunny limbo" (68-9), a Prester John-inspired "place of riches and mystery" (163), and "a picture of the Garden of Eden" (243). Overlooking the savannahs, Huxley adopts the imperial overseer's perspective: "You had the feeling that you were the first human being ever to stand upon the verge and gaze across the tufted grasses, like Cortez and the Pacific" (226).

Similarly, throughout her writings championing Lugard's "indirect rule,"<sup>9</sup> imperial historian Perham assumes the role of an observer whose superior knowledge of East Africans proves the sensitivity of her project of "benign" imperialism. In *East African Journey*, written from 1929-1930 but not published until 1976, she imagines German Ostafrika as one of the last remaining "African paradises" where the imperial experiment may be carried out: "It is a joyous thought that perhaps in Tanganyika, alone in Africa, we may still encounter all this primitive courtesy and friendliness and introduce the people to civilization without dissipating it all in a period of harshness, misunderstanding and exploitation" (93). Her repetition of German topographical valuations underscores

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<sup>8</sup> In its widest sense "East Africa" can be taken to comprise the 19 territories in the UN scheme of geographic regions: Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda ("East African Community"); Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia ("Horn of Africa"); Mozambique and Madagascar; Malawi, Zambia, and Zimbabwe (formerly the Central African Federation); Burundi and Rwanda; the Indian Ocean island nations of Comoros, Mauritius, and Seychelles; and the French "overseas departments" of Réunion and Mayotte. However, for the purposes of this chapter, I am most interested in literature from Tanzania and Zanzibar, and the territories formerly comprising British and German East Africa.

<sup>9</sup> See Perham's *Africans and British Rule* (1941) and *The Colonial Reckoning* (1961).



the link between paradisaal representations of the land and imperial competition to possess it: “If the plains are a hell of scrub and sand, Heaven is not far away, in a shape, hardly to be believed, gleaming now and then through high clouds. It is Kilimanjaro...No wonder the Kaiser coveted the mountain—and got it” (133).<sup>10</sup>

The second phase of writing in East Africa from the 1920s-1960s was driven by the need for didactic curriculum justifying and celebrating colonial rule, and local participation in literary production remained under the control of the imperial ruling class. Short stories appeared in the British-administrated newspaper *Mambo Leo*, and James Mbotela’s *Uhuru wa Watumwa* (1934), translated by C.G. Richards as *The Freeing of Slaves in East Africa*, became the first “novel” published in Tanganyika, a literary recollection of the slave-trade and its abolition by the British. Endorsing the British as *wema*, “God-sent saviours” and the Swahili, Arabs and Muslims as “villains,” the book was praised by the colonial administrators and incorporated into school readers (Topan “Why” 106).<sup>11</sup>

After the 1960s onwards, the literature of decolonization reconfigured European languages and writing practices for the local project of undermining colonial representations of African culture and restoring an African character to history. However, the persistence of Kiswahili as the lingua franca of East Africa, particularly in Tanzania and Zanzibar, enabled literature to follow a slightly different line of development, benefiting from cross-national cultural exchange and resisting the hegemony of English-language writing (Msiska 46-65). From the sung verse of Zanzibar’s Siti bint Saad, who “Africanized” the taarab tradition,<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Queen Victoria, overseeing the division of East Africa in the course of the Berlin conference, famously conceded Kilimanjaro to Germany because her cousin, the Kaiser, especially desired it.

<sup>11</sup> The novel’s aesthetic is less accomplished than other Tanzanian prose not promoted by the British. Critics debate whether it qualifies as a novel, a didactic autobiography, a factual narrative, or a prose narrative incorporating basic novelistic features distinct from preceding genres of Swahili prose (epic, chronicles, memoirs, travels) (Topan “Why” 105-6). Elena Bertocini argues that Shaaban Robert’s *Kusadikikuu* (1951), *Adili na Nduguze* (1952) and *Kufikirika* (1967) are more deserving of the accolade of the “first” Tanzanian novels.

<sup>12</sup> Taarab is Zanzibari string band music, combining classical Egyptian and Indian melodic forms with African percussion. Its name comes from the verb “tariba” meaning “to be moved, to excite.” It originated in 1870 when Seyyid Barghash sent a Zanzibari musician, Ibrahim Muhammed, to study in Cairo; on his return he formed the first taarab orchestra. In 1928, Siti bint Saad became taarab’s first star, singing in Kiswahili rather than Arabic, drawing a wider African audience. The music’s sung verses are an extension of intricately allusive Swahili poetry. Bi Kidude is the most famous living taarab singer; her lyrics are imbued with a feminist sensibility and social critique.



to the poetry of Robert Shabaan,<sup>13</sup> to the political plays of Ebrahim Hussein and the novels of Euphrase Kezilahabi,<sup>14</sup> Kiswahili was the primary language of early Tanzanian literature, a condition reinforced by government language policies. Profoundly influenced by Sufi expression and Islamic scriptures, Swahili literature demonstrates an inclination towards poetic and oral forms and has a strong tradition of public and religious commentary (Topan 116-23).

Yet, the history of publishing in Tanzania and Zanzibar has been fraught with financial difficulty, political intervention, and state censorship.<sup>15</sup> The nationalization of book writing, publishing and distribution contributed to an initial collapse of the publishing industry and the production of ideologically-hamstrung literature in support of the state. More Tanzanian novels for popular audiences in Swahili were published in the 1970s and early 1980s than in the 1960s or 1990s, although the 1977 unification of the TANU and ASP parties spurred a “Tanzanianizing” of Zanzibar’s revolt via state-sponsored novels reinforcing the “dominant” ideology of Zanzibar’s Post-Revolutionary Government, such as Shafi Adam Shafi’s *Karsi ya Mwinyi Fuad* “The House of Lord Fuad” (1978) and Said Ahmed Mohamed’s *Asali Chungu* “Bitter Honey” (1978) (Myers 438). However, the economic depression following the Kagera War (1978-1979) led to the bankruptcy of the independent publishers who had begun to emerge in the 1970s, causing hundreds of East African titles to go out-of-print. By the 1990s, most people could not afford to buy books, and due to decreased literacy, many could not read them.

In 1999, in accordance with IMF directives, the remaining parastatal publishers

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13 Tanzania’s major poet, Robert Shabaan (1909-1962) has been published in both Kiswahili and in English, though even Shabaan had less than half of his 22 works printed because he could not find ethical publishers willing to pay him royalties (Mulokozi 20, 37). Widely acknowledged as the “father of contemporary Swahili literature” Robert is best known for his collection of poetry, *Almasi za Afrika* (1960) or “African Diamonds,” but is also a novelist and essayist. His novels move from an early preoccupation with fantasy towards the social realism of *Siku ya Watenzi Wote* (1968) “The Day of Reckoning” and *Utubora Mkulima* (1968) “Utubora the Farmer.”

14 Ebrahim Hussein’s masterpiece *Kinjeketile* (1970) is set during the Maji Maji uprising from 1905 to 1907 against the German colonizers of East Africa. Kezilahabi is most recognized for his first novel *Rosa Mistika* (1971) and for his exploration of traumatic social change in *Duina Uwanja wa Fujo* (1975) “The World is a Chaotic Place.”

15 For a review of publishing in Tanzania, see M.M. Mulokozi’s “Publishing in Kiswahili” (1999).

were liquidized.<sup>16</sup> The lack of national distributors and publishing outlets greatly hinders the publication of “non-essential” literature. As a result, Tanzania is one of the least represented and critically-analyzed Anglophone regions in African literature, particularly in comparison to neighboring Kenya. However, Tanzanian Swahili pulp fiction and graphic novels have increasingly flourished from the 1990s, with works such as Prosper Rwegoshora’s *The Plight of Succession* (1990) and Ben Mtobwa’s *Dar-es-Salaam by Night* (1999) consumed among the urban middle and lower classes. The new commercial literature, free from government censorship and produced by authors who no longer adhere to political commitment and social criticism, reflects the socio-economic values of neo-liberalism: “private entrepreneurship, commercialization of culture, ‘embourgeoisement’ and the decline of a socialist system” (Blommaert “Pulp” 32). Whereas “serious” or “elite” novels were formerly expected to affirm traditional values and uphold or criticize state ideologies, these popular novels and comics tend to portray urban scenarios, romance, or social events. Abdulrazak Gurnah and Moyez G. Vassanji are among the few “elite” Anglophone writers to emerge from Tanzania, both publishing in the West.<sup>17</sup> However, alongside the growth of market capitalism and private enterprise, English language and culture has also regained status (Blommaert “Pulp” 30), meaning that literature may increasingly be produced in English, particularly in the new Internet media.

Contemporary uses of paradise or anti-paradise motifs by postcolonial African writers have primarily been ironic, melancholy, or calumniatory, articulating an “aesthetic of delegitimation” (Simatei 17) in which “independence is experienced as a nightmare and as loss rather than as fulfilment and recovery” (Simatei 14).<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Zanzibar’s first independent publisher in decades, Gallery Publications, opened in 2005.

<sup>17</sup> An Afro-Asian writer resident in Canada, Vassanji has published three novels, *The Gunny Sack* (1989), *No New Land* (1991), *The Book of Secrets* (1994), and a short-story collection: *Uhuru Street* (1991). *The Gunny Sack* drew comparisons as the “East African” *Midnight Children* for its postmodernist literary style and focus on the South Asian diaspora in Tanzania.

<sup>18</sup> Feminist African fiction also deploys paradise motifs to recuperate marginalized histories: in Senegalese Ken Bugul’s fictional-autobiography, *De l’Autre Côté du Regard* (2003) purgatory and ancestral presence are combined into a hybrid, re-gendered space that accommodates post-Christian secularism and African spirituality. Similarly, Aminatta Forna’s *Ancestor Stones* (2006) rewrites Portuguese fantasies of 16<sup>th</sup>-century Sierra Leone as paradise in order to reconstruct a matrilineal history of pre-colonial society: “The sailors...thought they had found Eden, and perhaps they had. But it was an Eden created not by the hand of God, but the hands of women” (1).



Thus, Tanzanian Foruk Topan's play *Aliyeonja Pepo* "A Taste of Heaven" (1973) draws on East African Islamic myths of paradise to contrast the sociopolitical systems of *Ujaama* and *Ubepari*, "socialism and capitalism," parody government bureaucracy, and imply disillusion with Karume's corrupt ideopraxis (Kruisheer 54).<sup>19</sup> Similarly, in Kenyan Karanja Wa Kang'ethe's *Mission to Gehenna* (1989), Kimuri's journey to Satan Lucifer's kingdom, where fraud, corruption, extortion and murder are normative, is an unsubtle allegory for the political abuses and structural inequalities of the postcolonial state and its collaborations with a neocolonial First World.<sup>20</sup> This demonstrates affinities to Nigerian Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1991), which conceives of the postcolonial nation as a purgatorial state-in-waiting, in which spirit-child Azaro slips between a pre-historical paradise and an occult underworld whose violent enchantments allegorize Nigeria's political upheavals and failure to progress to a utopian state after independence.<sup>21</sup>

However, in European writing, East Africa remains a locus for neocolonial fantasies. Tourism literature and travel writing market Zanzibar's "fair" beaches and "black" history,<sup>22</sup> while safari tours on the mainland sell Tanzania's Edenic reputation, heralding the Rift Valley as the "terrestrial paradise," "the cradle of mankind." Historical novels such as Wilbur Smith's *Monsoon* (1999) unabashedly rehearse nostalgia for imperial literature, re-enacting the "glories" of the British navy in response to the threat of Arab slavers on the "black coast." Similarly, expatriate fiction imagines East Africa as a troubled, fallen, or fleeing

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<sup>19</sup> In *African Theatre and Politics* (1996), Jane Plastow argues that theatre in Tanzania evolved through four stages: from "early colonial drama" marked by conformity, Christianity and suppression, to the "liberation struggle," to the "hope" of independence, to the "disillusion and debate" of contemporary theatre, into which latter category Topan's *Aliyeonja Pepo* falls.

<sup>20</sup> When Kimuri escapes Gehenna back to postcolonial Kenya, his reality remains hellish: "Why was I dreaming of being in Gehenna while I was still on Earth or of being on Earth while I was still in Gehenna?" (122). While politically trenchant, Kang'ethe's use of the inferno to represent postcolonial Kenya is problematic in that it seems to affirm the European image of Africa as hell.

<sup>21</sup> Okri's use of sliding states modelled on Yoruba folklore and orature suggests an equivalent to Wilson Harris's revision of Dante's ternary structure, representing Nigerian history as suspended in a "magical modernity" characterized by simultaneity, rupture, and recurrence, rather than progressing linearly from decolonization to the establishment of an utopian African nation.

<sup>22</sup> Thus an article in *The Travel Rag* exclaims: "Zanzibar: the name alone conjures up exotic images of sun, and spice, coconuts and conch shells....But paradise is never perfect. [...] Zanzibar's history of slave-trading, spice-trading and English and Omani colonial domination has painted a history more unique than most destinations" (Ord par. 1).

paradise, in which the European's privileged existence is under threat. Thus, in Francesca Marciano's *Rules of the Wild* (1998), the British-Italian protagonist is guiltily conscious that she enjoys a lifestyle of luxury in Kenya and Tanzania that she could never achieve in Europe. She attributes her paradisaal fantasies to "First World" literature exoticizing East Africa: "Absolutely everyone writes about and celebrates East Africa as this virgin paradise, this Garden of Eden" (195). Claiming she suffers from "*mal d'afrique*," a mixture of "vertigo," "corrosion" and "nostalgia" (17), she insists her desire for sublime landscapes is spiritual rather than material: "It wasn't just the beauty of Africa, it was its moral geography that I wanted to be part of" (52). Following her "expulsion" from Kenya, she protests the denial of her life of neocolonial privilege: "We should all have the right to be angels, since we live in Paradise" (299).

War correspondent Aidan Hartley's memoir *The Zanzibar Chest* (2003) similarly oscillates between corrosive guilt, nostalgia, and fear of expulsion in its recollection of East Africa as "the last landfall" of former "colonial rulers" (19).<sup>23</sup> He mourns the passing of his childhood "African paradise" in Tanganyika, "a memory pulverized by history" (24) and represents East Africa as an Eden forged by whites, now fallen from grace: "'We were in a paradise,' my father said, 'that we can never forget, nor equal'" (44). Hartley personifies the Western media image of Africa as a Hegelian nightmare of famine, "disease and pestilences of unknown origins" and "intertribal" wars which bring genocide in their wake (Taiwo 2). The violent wars of Somalia, Rwanda, and Ethiopia form a purgatorial terrain in which he believes he can expunge the "dark shadow" of his troubled conscience: "In witnessing the suffering and beauty of Africa's story, I have finally become a tiny part of its fabric" (442).

With the advent of post 9/11 politics, "Islamic" Zanzibar also functions as a repository for Western anxieties about "terrorist breeding-grounds," where the lure of the exotic exists alongside the anti-paradisaal threat of retribution. Malawi-raised Giles Foden's *Zanzibar* (2002) explores the quixotic ideals of two

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<sup>23</sup> "We who had been in India, the Far East, the Antipodes, the Americas and the South Sea islands stayed on...powerless, few in number..and very happy in our exile" (Hartley 19).



Americans drawn to Zanzibar by the desire for redemption.<sup>24</sup> Nick, a marine conservationist, hopes to “reclaim paradise” by rescuing Zanzibar’s coral reefs from pollution, while Miranda works for the American embassy, overseeing the liberalization of Tanzania’s economy. However, when they are abducted by Khaled, a confused Islamic fundamentalist responsible for the 1998 bombings of Dar-es-Salaam, their illusions of Zanzibar are replaced by a vision of its postcolonial “fallenness”:

Zanzibar... The name itself, languid and conspiratorial, was a kind of illusion. It seemed to speak of the heart’s desire, of that yearning for paradise which is itself a sign we are fallen—that we are in the dirty realm of history, of actuality, of fact. The state of disgrace is not one of which we like to be reminded. (124)

Foden masterfully portrays neo-liberal American policy in East Africa, Afghanistan, and the Middle East as deluded by myths of exceptionalism and partly culpable for intensifying the conditions of economic deprivation and alienation in which the fundamentalist rhetoric of *jihad* and paradise thrives.<sup>25</sup> At the conclusion, Nick finally realizes “Zanzibar was not paradise, and never had been” (388), yet the novel never wholly transcends its central narrative—the endangerment of two white people in “black” Zanzibar—or its blinkered focus on Western agency.

Globalization has triggered a new contest for economic power, a “third scramble for Africa” in which Chinese, Japanese, Brazilian, North American and European corporations compete to plunder the continent’s mineral resources and tourist sites. In *A Girl from Zanzibar* (2002), Roger King suggests that semi-mythic

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<sup>24</sup> Foden is half-Irish, half-British, born in Warwickshire and brought up in Malawi. Most of his novels investigate the colonial and post-colonial legacies of East and South Africa. *The Last King of Scotland* (1998) adopts the perspective of a naïve white protagonist to explore the horrors of Idi Amin’s Uganda and to indict Western complicity in the installation and support of Amin’s regime. *Mimi and Toutou Go Forth* (2004) is a more nostalgic recreation of the British conquest of German gunships on Lake Tanganyika during WWI, which exposes the colonial players on both sides as bumbling “sham heroes” but sentimentalizes their exploits nonetheless.

<sup>25</sup> The novel cuts back in time to show Osama Bin Laden being groomed by CIA forces to lead the Afghani *mujahideen* against Russia. Foden’s rejection of politicized Islam is voiced through the epiphany of Khaled, the Zanzibar-born bomber. After the bombing, Khaled is consumed with guilt and categorically rejects the “paradisal” rhetoric of Bin Laden, realizing it leads not to paradise but to “Gehenna”: “All the Sheikh’s talk of a pleasing Paradise, a walled and lofty garden...its clusters nigh to gather—this was nothing but words, false resemblance designed to wind into one’s mind, covering havoc and ruin with cloying murmurs” (Foden 343).

entrepôts of former trade empires like “Timbucktu, Xanadu, Shangri-la, and Zanzibar” retain their mystique in the Western imagination because they express the neo-imperial desire for new gold-lands: “These were places...that a more primitive Europe once envied and feared, old reputations that lived on as myth, leaving behind an inexplicable, exotic resonance to Western ears” (29).<sup>26</sup> King’s protagonist imagines that post-socialist Zanzibar will be re-colonized by Western financiers and resume its “old role as the hub of African trade” in the global market: “Think, Hong Kong of Africa...It’s what Africa’s been lacking, a financial centre” (279-80). King ironically compares Britain’s complicity with “slave traders in the good graces of the Sultan of Zanzibar” to the modern global market which sanctions “unpleasant governments, crooked financiers, arms dealers, mercenaries, and spies” so long as their dealings benefit Western economies (269-70). Finally, King criticizes the reification of Zanzibar as a tourist paradise for obscuring the “difficulty and darkness” (29) of its economic, political history.<sup>27</sup>

### **“Crude Fictions,” “Lies of Liberation”: Gurnah, Naipaul, and National Ideology**

“Independence by itself does not solve any problems: very often it increases them...”

- Maulid M. Haj, *Sowing the Wind*

Responding to these new conditions, Abdulrazak Gurnah’s writing is pervaded by a post-national malaise and a weary understanding of the historical events and processes of peripheral nations as fuelled by the economic and political policies of global capitalism. His position in regard to Tanzanian nationalism, socialism, and globalization is revealed in his most explicitly political novel, *Admiring Silence*

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<sup>26</sup> Born in London, but living in the US, Roger King is the author of three novels, *Horizontal Hotel*, *Written on a Stranger’s Map*, and *Sea Level*, and a socio-economist for various UN agencies and charities in Asia and Africa. Recently he advised the UN on reconstruction aid for Afghanistan, and produced a film documentary *Still, The Children Are Here* (2003) with Mira Nair about Northeastern India. *A Girl From Zanzibar* draws on his socio-economic expertise to skewer the exploitation and inequalities inherent to the global market.

<sup>27</sup> In 1983, after the defection of the East European advisors and before the advent of tourism, King’s protagonist writes, “No tourists came to coo at our palm trees and tropical beaches and tell us we were paradise on earth. We had no food for them, nowhere for them to stay. What we had were skeletons left over from the slave trade, living memories of a murderous revolution” (5).



(1996). Gurnah is an expatriate, or perhaps an “apatride,” who chooses to write in English, rather than Kiswahili. Born in Zanzibar in 1948, he immigrated to England at the age of 18, fleeing conditions of “state terror” after the 1964 Revolution. The majority of his novels, *Memory of Departure* (1987), *Pilgrim’s Way* (1988), *Dottie* (1990), and *By the Sea* (2001), document the experience of diaspora and immigration in contemporary Britain and dismantle national identity formations—British, African, or Swahili—based on strategies of exclusion.

However, *Admiring Silence* specifically examines the legacies of Zanzibar’s independence in the 1960s, communicating a sense of betrayal at the “fake ideologies” of African nationalism and socialism (Simatei 17). Gurnah’s protagonist echoes popular Zanzibari sentiment in representing the 1964 union as stripping Zanzibar of its autonomy and reducing it to a vassal state of Tanzania:

The island part of our republic had been forced into marriage with the big state next door after the uprising, but we retained our own Rais, and our own Revolutionary Council for the Redemption of the Nation, our own jails and a myriad of picnic sites where our psychopathic authorities could play their dirty little games. (157)

Contemporary Zanzibaris acknowledge Karume’s despotic violence but tend not to demonize him, directing their anger towards Nyerere instead, who, “they claim, knew full well the atrocities that were being committed in Zanzibar and yet did little to stop them” (Askew “Sung” 27). In *Admiring Silence*, Gurnah’s protagonist excludes Nyerere from a list of heroic African leaders including Nkrumah, Lumumba and Kenyatta (66), and derides Nyerere as “Rais of the Federal Republic, who had presided for decades over the crumbling state while his carefully modulated commentaries on the crumbling state soothed liberal consciences in Europe and North America” (157).

Such bitterness recalls Shiva Naipaul’s earlier *North of South* (1978), a travel narrative set in Kenya, Tanzania, and Zambia that sets out to explore what “terms like ‘liberation,’ ‘revolution,’ ‘African socialism’ actually mean to the people...who experience them” (13). According to Naipaul, collectivization enabled Tanzanian peasants to overthrow colonial land policies, but also homogenized diverse tribal and Swahili populations. He satirizes Ujaama as a

prelapsarian myth, which erases the centuries-long history of Arab and Indian mercantilism in coastal East Africa and essentializes African culture: “Sin, in the guise of capitalist yearnings, entered the African’s simple soul and corrupted it. Falling from grace he was driven out of the Garden of Eden” (202). For Naipaul, Nyerere’s romanticized image of “innocent” proto-socialist Africa ironically derives from the “latter-day creation myths” of colonial writers who represented Africa as a settler’s Eden: “[The settler] conjured the Highlands out of the African void and imprinted upon them his own image” (132). These myths elide the Afro-Arab and Asian presence through polarized constructions of race, constructing a “Black/White Affair” which leaves no space for “Brown” (110). Naipaul justifiably condemns the stereotypes of Asians as “little more than [misers] who ceaselessly exploited and cheated innocent Africans” (110) which fuel ethnic cleansing campaigns in East Africa.

However, while Naipaul deconstructs the ideological myths of paradise deployed throughout postcolonial East Africa, he persists in representing Africa as “empty,” “brute geography,” complicit in its own mythologization: “If the Highlands of neighbouring Kenya stimulated to fresh life outmoded and frustrated aristocratic longings in a certain type of European settler, then...Independent Tanzania has stimulated the fantasies of outmoded...socialists” (199). His anti-paradisal rhetoric reverses the tropes of paradise into the tropes of void: “The African soul is a blank slate on which anything can be written; onto which any fantasy can be transposed” (199). By the memoir’s conclusion, his critique of African political philosophy escalates into a hysterical denunciation of the continent’s mimicry of the corrupt West:

Black Africa, with its gimcrack tyrannies...its false philosophies, its fabricated statehoods, returns to Europe its own features, but grotesquely caricatured—as they might be seen in one of those distorting funhouse mirrors....Hopeless, doomed continent! Only lies flourished here. Africa was swaddled in lies—the lies of an aborted European civilization; the lies of liberation. (347-8)

Echoing his brother’s nihilistic insistence on Africa’s primitivism, Naipaul reduces Africa to an infernal mirror of Western failure, devoid of potential agency



or cultural resistance.<sup>28</sup>

Gurnah has also criticized the “crude fictions” of early nationalisms which represent pre-colonial Africa as a homogenous, communal paradise: “Many African societies have used this as a way of expelling and tormenting, in Uganda, for example, with Idi Amin, and in Zanzibar...the idea of who belongs...is made into an essentialist fiction” (Nasta 359). In *Admiring Silence*, he expands this to a critique of the nationalist-turned-comprador-bourgeoisie who appropriate the nation-state as an instrument to exploit the people in collusion with the neocolonial First World:

Why do I say our societies when we are all so different, from Timbuctoo to Algiers to Havana to East Timor? Because in this we are all the same, that we keep silent and nod—for fear of our lives—while bloated tyrants fart and stamp on us for their petty gratification. ...In the meantime, the moneybags who rule our world can continue with the anguished business of watching our antics on TV...secure in the knowledge that a small donation here to fund a translation project and a modest shipment of arms there will keep the plague in the thirsty borderlands of their globe and away from their doors. (191-2)

The rhetoric of betrayal, cynicism and stasis which characterizes Gurnah’s work here seems reminiscent of the disillusion which Neil Lazarus has described afflicting African literature of the 1960s and 70s, caused by a “preliminary overestimation of the emancipatory potential of Independence” (23).

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<sup>28</sup> Shiva’s writings have been neglected in comparison to his famous elder brother, V.S. Naipaul, whose anti-paradisal representation of Africa as a history-less void seething with revolutions has attracted ample criticism. V.S. Naipaul’s impression of Africa’s nullity is epitomized in his infamous description of the Congo: “To arrive at this sense of a country trapped and static, eternally vulnerably, is to begin to have something of the African sense of the void” (“Return” 204). Naipaul’s rejection of colonial nostalgia is carried out in a series of novels which portray Africa as yielding only disillusion for those who visit in search of paradisal experience: whether *In a Free State* (1971) whose white British protagonist envisions South Africa as a paradise of sexual freedom; *A Bend in the River* (1979), whose protagonist is urged to “trample on the garden” and forsake hope of Africa as either a past paradise or future progression; or in *Half a Life* (2001), where the colonial fantasies of a Caribbean man in a decaying Portuguese colony in East Africa are revealed as hollow, anachronistic, and exploitative. Rod Nixon’s critique of V.S. Naipaul might also be applied to Shiva. Nixon diagnoses Naipaul’s repeated use of “terms of dismissal” as arguing “for a conception of postcolonial societies as stagnant due, in large part, to their isolation from history” (110) and expressing Naipaul’s assumption that “values of the globally marginalized and the ‘primitive’ are not even functionally valid in their own contexts,” that “such cultures have nothing to offer the West” (113).

However, Gurnah lacks the politicized nationalism of earlier writers such as Ngũgĩ or Armah, and his work has not demonstrated a corresponding move towards identification with the masses by way of radical renewal. Like the Afro-Asian Moyez Vassanji, his affiliations as a marginalized Afro-Arab-Zanzibari do not permit a simple identification with the anti-colonial nationalism that surrounded him as an adolescent (Lewis 217). Instead, in the 1990s cultural context of globalization, Gurnah occupies an “ambivalent narrative space” between the extremes of the dominant and residual scripts of the revolution, using irony and lyrical prose to expose “the sins of omission and commission on both sides” (Myers 441). His fiction might be characterized as “post-national,” providing the literary voice of a new class unenthused by either state-organized revolution, Naipaulian wholesale rejections of the possibilities of resistance, or political charades of multi-partyism and neo-liberal democracy.

The destabilization of nationality implied by Gurnah’s rejection of both the assertions of the national and of the ethnic is a product not so much of diaspora, but rather of “a state more inherent in the interaction of human beings in zones of complex ethnic and cultural identifications” such as East Africa (Callahan 55). His fourth novel, *Paradise* (1994), and his most recent, *Desertion* (2005), revisit pre-colonial and colonial Zanzibar and Tanganyika in order to interrogate how the versions of East African history informing contemporary national and global relations erase the complexity of these zones. However, given the material phenomena of globalization and brain drain which currently undermine the autonomy of African nations, the question rises whether Gurnah formulates the possibility of material resistance to Western domination, or whether he can only do so through subtle subversion (Lewis 216). Without a nation to allegorize or an “imagined community” around which to organize political agency, does his writing “represent an end to one form of cultural resistance to multinational capitalism” or “simply a new form of post-nationalist politics?” (Lewis 217). Furthermore, analysis of Gurnah’s writing must question his position in the global market.

Gurnah has admitted in interviews to publishing for a Western audience due to the



lack of publishing outlets in Tanzania,<sup>29</sup> but also claims that he always writes with Zanzibar in mind, and in 2006, he gave his first public reading on Unguja at the Festival of the Dhow Countries. The publication of the Booker-nominated *Paradise* not only benefited from the 1990s surge of Western interest in the “postcolonial exotic,” but also coincided with the transformation of Zanzibar into a tourist paradise. After the revolutionary regime initiated an UN-financed program for Stone Town’s redevelopment in the late 1980s, tourism became the mainstay of islands’ economy, exceeding clove production. Ironically, Stone Town, once disparaged as the symbolic site of Omani Arab oppression, is now the centre of the tourist industry (Myers 438). While tourism has brought a flow of revenue, commodities, and new technology including wireless Internet and ATMs into the islands, it has also brought prostitution, drugs, “coca-cola culture” and increased pressure on natural resources. The last decade has seen a severe degradation of the island’s coral reefs and fishing grounds as sustainable traditions are abandoned. Signs in the local Palace museum warn: “Zanzibar may be a Tourist Paradise (*Peop wa Wahtalii*), but it will require sensitive management to ensure it does not become Paradise Lost (*Pepo Ilipotea*).”

National rhetoric marketing Zanzibar’s paradise is in full force: the Minister of Education, Culture and Sports opened the 2006 Festival of the Dhow Countries by addressing Western tourists with familiar clichés—“Welcome to the exotic, warm, spicy, friendly islands of Zanzibar!”<sup>30</sup>—while a full-size mural in a local restaurant proclaims, “Welcome to Zanzibar ‘A Paradise Within a Paradise’” and urges customers to buy a spice, dolphin or reef excursion with “Sun and Sea Tours” (see Figure 4). *Paradise* appeared a year before *Seas of Zanzibar* (1995), a UK-directed documentary film heralding the economic opening up of the islands—“Zanzibar, the name alone so bewitching, people will come here on the strength of the name itself”—but warning of the threat posed to this possible

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<sup>29</sup> For example, when Gurnah was asked why his books have not been translated into Kiswahili, he replied, “There has been one attempt to get *Paradise* published in Tanzania but there wasn’t enough paper – it had been earmarked for a government white paper. I received a transcript from someone who has started to translate *Admiring Silence* off their own back. There is...little publishing in Tanzania” (Walder par 16).

<sup>30</sup> The Hon. Haroun A. Suleiman speaking at the closing ceremony of the Festival of the Dhow Countries, Stonetown, Unguja, 2006, as recorded by the author.

paradise by global modernity—"Now on the eve of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Zanzibar is pushed to the brink of irreversible change." Given this rhetoric in conjunction with the book's appealingly lyric prose and suggestive title, *Paradise* might easily be co-opted to market Zanzibar-as-endangered-paradise; even Gurnah's position as an Afro-Arab writing about a region in Africa unusual in its Arab influence can be constructed to appeal to fantasies of accessing a particularly "exotic" and hitherto inaccessible culture.

However, as a far from mythical location with a central position in African history, Zanzibar is particularly ripe for analysis in the context of the paradise motif, due to the cultural intersection of Islamic, Christian, and animist religious imaginaries and the complex intermingling of Orientalist and Africanist fantasies about the region. Gurnah's writing is therefore of great significance in dismantling the fair land/black coast dichotomy and engaging with East Africa's function as a "gold-land" in the European and Arab imaginary. *Paradise* does not refer to the nostalgia for "lost wholeness" historically central to the recuperative agenda of early postcolonial narratives, but rather to the "overplayed" optimism and "understated" apprehensions which Gurnah has characterized early nationalism as displaying (Callahan 66). The novel has two main functions: to deconstruct originary myths of ethnic homogeneity, and to demonstrate the function of paradise within the economies of trade in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Swahili Africa, in which the prominence of people and ivory as commodities created a state of violent or precarious exchange in direct contradiction to Nyerere's imagination of proto-socialist communalism. Gurnah engages the long history of paradise discourse in East Africa in order to dismantle polarized representations by Europeans, to complicate the strategic nationalisms of African fictions, and to illustrate the discursive function of paradise for Islamic mercantilism, mission and empire. Finally, Gurnah positions his novel against Naipaul's rhetoric of pre-colonial Africa as an unformed void, promoting a vision of Arab, Swahili, and African culture and ethnicity in all its fluid and bewildering complexity.



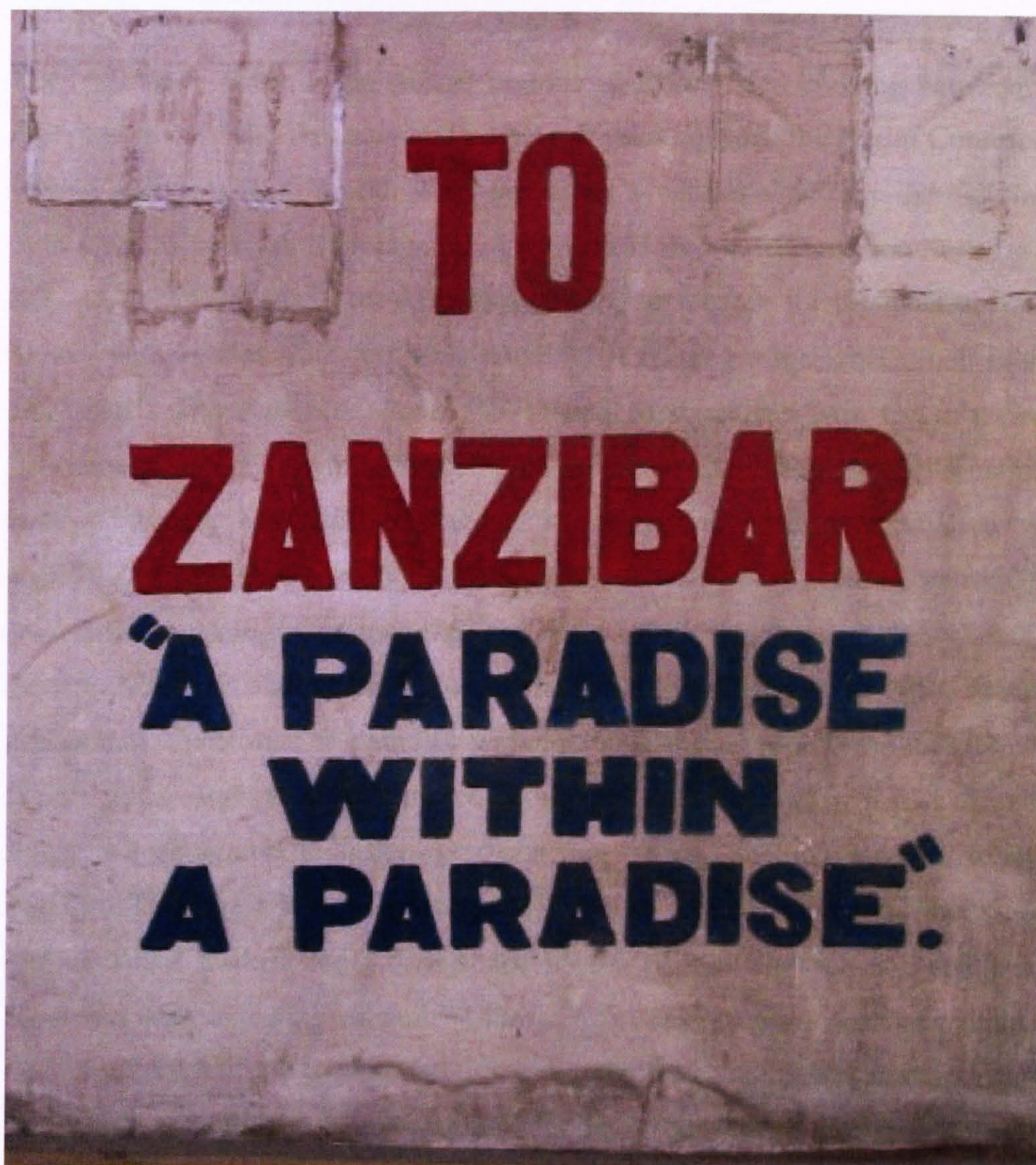


Figure 4: Wall Mural in a Stone Town restaurant. Photograph by Sharae Deckard (2006).



## Paradise and Anti-Paradise in the Swahili Imaginary

*Paradise* takes place in the coastal regions of East Africa, moving between the Zanzibar islands and the mainland interior. Poised between the Berlin Conference (1890) and the First World War, the novel's central theme is the fall from innocence of its Swahili protagonist, Yusuf. Sold into indentured servitude by his parents to "Uncle" Aziz, an Afro-Arab trader, as ransom for their debts, Yusuf slowly realizes that Aziz "ain't his uncle," but rather his master. Gurnah echoes Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1991) and Mozambican Mia Couto's *Terra Sonâmbula* (1992) in symbolizing the obstacles to establishing a viable national polity through his child protagonist's vulnerability to manipulation and exploitation (Callahan 60). The novel's title invokes not the Miltonic narrative of loss and expulsion, but rather the Koranic gardens which good men expect to inherit after death and which rich men emulate in their life (Lewis 225). Yusuf is seduced by the stories of paradise he hears on his journey into the interior with Aziz's trade caravan and enraptured by the walled courtyard in Aziz's Zanzibar house, whose geometric design, precious flowers, and flowing waters symbolize paradise: "Orange and pomegranate trees were scattered in parts of the garden, and as Yusuf walked under their shade he felt like an intruder, and smelt their blossoms with a feeling of guilt" (42-3).<sup>31</sup> As Yusuf's guilt portends, both the walled garden and the traveller's tales will prove to be artificial paradises, bound up with the exploitation and infernalization of the Other, whether from the perspective of an Arab, an African, an Indian, or an European traveller.

In his introduction to *New Essays on African Literature*, Gurnah challenges Ngugi's view on languages, arguing that the use of English by African writers from formerly colonized states can be subversive. He cites Okri as a writer whose work "subverts and resists Europe's misrepresenting discourse" by combining complex usages of the "novel form in English" with narrative forms deriving from Yoruba orature (ix). Similarly, in *Paradise*, Gurnah alters the bildungsroman to capture the multicultural polyphony and rich literary traditions of the pre-colonial

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<sup>31</sup> The geometrical divisions symbolize the four rivers of paradise, the rich fruit trees and flowers represent the abundance of paradise, and the music conjures the sexual ecstasies of paradise (Lehrmann 61).



Swahili coast, interweaving allusions to Islamic marvels literature, the Koran, the Arabian Nights, the Alexander Romances, European imperialist travel narratives, and Swahili oral narratives.<sup>32</sup> The Koranic story of Muhammad's journey to hell and heaven has spawned myriad narratives of fantastic voyages,<sup>33</sup> prompting Islamic mystics to imagine the progress of the spiritual life as a pilgrimage through a metaphysical terrain.

In *Paradise*, Yusuf and his companions expect to encounter paradise and hell in the blank spaces of the map. Their attempts to assimilate the unknown—to imagine Africa—draw on the Swahili imaginary of Koranic and Arabic myths. Through the constant exchange of stories between Yusuf and his Indian, Muslim, and Swahili acquaintances, Gurnah signposts how their differing cultural heritages inflect their imagination of paradise and of Africa's geography. When Yusuf asks what lies westward on the caravan route, Hussein describes the interior through the mystic topoi of the Islamic world:

When you get as far as the lakes...you'll see that the world is ringed with mountains which give the green tint to the sky. Those mountains on the other side of the lake are the edge of the world we know. Beyond them, the air has the colour of plague and pestilence, and the creatures who live in it are known only to God. The east and the north are known to us, as far as the land of China in the farthest east and to the ramparts of Gog and Magog in the north. But the west is the land of darkness, the land of jinns and monsters. (83)

Like medieval cartographers, Hussein assumes that Africa's interior is peopled by savages and demons, and like imperial British writers, that it is a heart of darkness. Yet, Hussein alleges the Fountain of Life to exist amidst the darkness

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<sup>32</sup> In *The Way of the World* (2000), Franco Moretti argues that the social function of the bildungsroman became obsolete by WWI, but the rise of feminist, anti-colonial, multi-culturalist and civil rights politics led to an reinvigoration of the genre for non-Western, marginalized populations, particularly in post-colonial contexts. These authors "confront the normative demands of the genre by challenging not only the assumptions of a masculinist, unitary, and essentially solitary heroic development in the traditional models, but also the presumed linearity and smooth teleology of developmental time" (Slaughter 1).

<sup>33</sup> These include 12<sup>th</sup>-century Moorish mystic Muhyi-al-Din Ibn 'Arabi's allegory of man's ascension to heaven in "I-Futuh al-Makkiya" and 11<sup>th</sup>-century Syrian Abu al-'Ala'al-Ma'arri's "Risalat al-Ghufran" epic describing a journey to a heaven and hell populated by poets and writers, which allegedly inspired Dante's *Commedia* (Attar 20).

and merchant Hamid similarly associates Yusuf's report of great waterfalls in the interior with the four rivers of Paradise which "run in different directions...dividing God's garden into quarters" (80). For the Muslims, Africa is imagined as part of the greater earthly garden, whose lands of darkness can be cultivated to resemble paradise once more. By invoking the prophet Yusuf, Hussein melds the exploration of unknown territories for the purposes of trade and empire with the narrative of Islamic mission: "God sent the other Yusuf as a prophet to the land of jinns and savages, perhaps he'll send you too" (83).

However, Sikh Kalasingha challenges Hamid's Islamic view of paradise, slyly insisting that paradise was not a spiritual location, but rather the carnal pleasure grounds of the "Mogul barbarians in India": "They used to have orgies on the terraces and keep animals in the garden so they could go hunting whenever they felt like it. So this must be Paradise" (80). Kalasingha's artificial Mogul paradises create an uneasy parallel with the walled paradises of the Omani Arabs in their garden cities, drawing an angry retort from Hamid: "Do you think God is crazy? ...To put Paradise in India?" (80). Although Hamid mocks him and calls him a banyan, a "hairy blasphemer," Kalasingha announces his intention "to translate the Koran...into Swahili" and reiterates his belief that the original garden of Eden exists on earth. Through the tenuous friendship of Kalasingha, Hamid, and Hussein, Gurnah reveals the potential within 19<sup>th</sup>-century East African society for multicultural interaction and exchange of ideas. Despite the enmities and prejudices dividing Arabs, Indians, and indigenous Africans, the three groups were interdependent. To the extent that they interacted through trade, they were always involved in the process of cultural translation, as Kalasingha's impulse to translate the Koran suggests.

Gurnah recreates the unreliability of Arab travel literature by withholding or providing untranslated place names and signifiers of culture, ethnicity and religion. The narrative seems deceptively superficial, until the Western reader becomes aware of experiencing a kind of estrangement originating from the inability to identify specific locations, events, or ethnicities without consulting maps and histories. There are no clear-cut racial divisions; the characters train individual prejudices on one another. In an interview, Gurnah explains that



*Paradise* was influenced by a period he spent travelling the Swahili coasts:

During my travels in East Africa, I was always talking to people and hearing their stories...I also read 19<sup>th</sup>-century Swahili oral histories and accounts of the advent of German colonialism collected by Wissmani and Hitchens. I read one story of travel that been translated into English—and it didn't 'sound right'—it sounded like Swahili translated into English. My novel is full of these moments when people don't understand each other. I tried to find a narrative voice which would show this kind of guesswork, moving between different registers. As I wrote, I would think of the stories people had told me during my travels and translate them into Swahili and back into English again. I didn't want an English that sounded clear or unclouded. ("Personal")

The novel's ambiguity is not authorial vagueness, but rather a deliberate evocation of the atmosphere of intercultural encounters where subjects are unable to "read" or "translate" the Other, and therefore approach the Other through the haze of their own preconceptions. This is not Africa as unknowable, mysterious, or void, but rather Africa as shrouded by the traveller's defensive projections, by preconceived myths capable of both illuminating and obscuring truths about different cultures.

When Yusuf leaves his friends to journey into the interior, he draws on all three of their images of paradise to narrate his experience. Like his Koranic namesake, brought by an Arab caravan to Egypt, Yusuf is an interpreter of dreams following a caravan through Africa, who joins traditions through his storytelling. His narrative of his travels is marked by many of the same anti-paradisaal signs as European travel narratives of East Africa. Margery Perham's description of Kilimanjaro in her travel diary, for example, endows the mountain with tropical abundance: "I was overwhelmed by the beauty of this famous mountain... The earth seems as prolific as the South Sea Islands and gives the same sense of abundant life revelling in sunshine and rain" (123). However, this beauty is illusory—"a delusion of richness and variety" (102), fatally decadent—"We saw one most beautiful sight, rather sinister, too: a forest being strangled by flowers," and pestilent—"Mosquitoes, lake-fly, tsetse, locusts and many other pests make Africa anything but a Garden of Eden" (79).

Africa's highest mountain, Mount Kilimanjaro is the agglomeration of three extinct volcanoes. Standing beside Mount Meru, it looms up dramatically out of the flat East African plateau, creating a rain-shadow which waters the fertile banana groves and coffee plantations of Moshi and Arusha. Until the 1840s, Kilimanjaro was one of the great mysteries of the interior. Europeans did not believe a snow-capped mountain could exist on the equator, dismissing it as an Arab legend.<sup>34</sup> Yet, the great Muslim caravans that ventured into the interior collected water from the mountain's permanent streams. In the Swahili, Chagga and Machame dialects, Kilimanjaro means "Mountain of Greatness," "Mountain of Whiteness," or "Mountain of Caravans." For Yusuf, Kilimanjaro is a sublime landscape, endowed with the divine presence:

The light on the mountain is green...Like no light I've ever imagined...  
And the air is as if it has been washed clean. In the morning, when the sun strikes the peak of snow, it feels like eternity... It was beautiful, as if everything was complete. You could hear God breathing. But a man tried to chase us away. (180)

Yusuf interprets the "huge red land" of the plateau, "teeming with people and animals" at "the edges of the known world" (158) as the Islamic paradise, and believes Kilimanjaro's cliffs "like walls of flame" are "the gates of paradise" (181). The man that blocks the path is German, symbolizing Britain's concession of Kilimanjaro to Germany during the Berlin Conference. In one sense, as an African, Yusuf is barred from his own "paradise." In another sense, as a Swahili travelling with a caravan from the coasts, he never had any right to the land.

His vision of the paradisaal interior is troubled by infernal signs: "thunderous waters," "a high wall with a gate of flame," light "the colour of plague," birdsong like "a prophecy of pestilence" (158). The lost earthly paradise protected by gates of fire and plague recalls the mystique of retribution which haunts European travel

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<sup>34</sup> After the Arab geographers of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, it was 12<sup>th</sup>-century Chinese traders who next recorded descriptions of a great mountain west of Zanzibar. However, British explorers and geographers dismissed the legend, heading inland in search of the source of the Nile, not the mysterious snow on the equator. It was not until some ten years after missionaries Johann Ludwig Krapf and Johann Rebmann's reports of discovering "a remarkable white on the mountains of Jagga" that Kilimanjaro's existence was accepted and mapped.



narratives set in Africa, where the imperial see-er's repressed guilt surfaces in the fear that his desire for the interior's gold-lands will be punished by disease. However, as *rehani*, slave-ransom, Yusuf does not occupy the same position of power as the imperial overseer. As the caravan passes deeper into the tropics, the narration shifts away from Yusuf's perspective of the land's paradisaal fertility to a third-person depiction of its tropical decadence:

The appearance of the green landscape cheered them at first. The bushes shook and shuddered with birds...But the glossy shrubs hid barbed creepers and were tangled with poisonous vines...Insects bit them day and night. Clothes and flesh were torn by thorns and strange ailments. (126)

The deeper Aziz's caravan penetrates into the tropical interior, the more the landscape is infernalized: "strange plants" lacerate their faces, they are "tormented" by mosquitoes in great numbers, their "stinking bodies" succumb to delirium and ooze "black blood" (150). Convinced that their African guide is leading them astray, they cane him nearly to death. Feverish imagination thus produces violence, as the fear of the unknown manifests itself in the anti-paradise—the simultaneous attribution of paradisaal and infernal aspects to the interior.

In demystifying the "fair land," Gurnah would risk infernalizing it, except that his use of the tropes of European travel narratives—pestilence, tropical decadence, fatal beauty—does not function as parody alone. Rather, by basing Yusuf's account of the interior on similar passages in Tippu Tip's autobiography of his travels, Gurnah attributes the same mystique of retribution to the Swahili imagination as in the European, only in relation to Arab expansionism and mercantilism.<sup>35</sup> Aziz self-consciously meditates on the way his desire for the land

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<sup>35</sup> Tippu Tip describes his journey with Stanley along the banks of the Congo. Searching for the source of the Nile, Stanley foolhardily decides to enter a dense forest against Tip's advice:

They found themselves in face of Mitamba, a thick, black forest, in whose shade, which no ray of sunlight illumined, the travellers were swallowed up. He who has not seen it with his own eyes a tropical primeval forest can scarcely form an idea of the horrors of such a wilderness...a stifling mouldy atmosphere meets the intruder. Between stout and gigantic trees wind creepers as high as a man...and grasp with their octopus-like arms at the garments of the wanderer. (Brode 60)

Tip's porters christen the jungle the "Forest of the Infidel" and announce "the forest through which they were now passing was not made for travel; only vile pagans, monkeys, and wild beasts could harbour in it" (Brode 60). This episode shows the similarity between infernal signs in European and Swahili representations of the tropical jungle and its inhabitants.

is generated by its illusion of paradise: “When you look on this land...it fills you with longing. So pure and bright. You may be tempted to think that its inhabitants know neither sickness nor ageing” (114). Recalling his words later, Yusuf muses that “all of them, stuck in one smelly place or another, [were] infested by longing and comforted by visions of lost wholeness” (175) Throughout the novel, the different visions of paradise which the characters pursue are revealed as destructive, usually linked to the violence of exploitative commerce: not particularly Arab, nor Islamic, nor African, but rather universally pervasive (Lewis 225). It is the infectious desire to own, to possess, to exploit which is pestilential, not the landscape.

### **Journey into the Interior: Invoking Swahili Historical Perspectives**

Following Yusuf westward with Aziz’s caravan, Gurnah reverses European narratives of penetration into the “heart of darkness,” replacing the imperial “I’s”/eyes with those of the Muslim traders as they navigate the East African interior (Bardolph 64). The melodramatic, “exotic” chapter titles—“The Walled Garden,” “The Gates of Flame,” “The Grove of Desire,” “The Mountain Town,” “Journey to the Interior”—evoke the highly-coloured topoi of *Arabian Nights* and the travel narratives of Burton, Stanley, and Speke. The novel’s plot also recalls Stanley’s adventure novel, *My Kalulu: Prince King and Slave* (1899), which traces the ill fortunes of an Arab slave-caravan to Lake Tanganyika. After the Arabs are massacred by the Africans they intended to enslave, the only survivors, several young boys, are enslaved by even more vicious blacks, the “Wazavila assassins.” Only after reaching British-run Zanzibar are they freed. Stanley constructs a hierarchy of black savagery in which the Arab slavers are only marginally superior to the “fiendish” Wazavila. The moral is clear: “the internal slave trade will cease only when Europeans forces squelch slave-trading tribes like the Wazavila and harness the African to the wheel of ‘legitimate commerce’” (Brantlinger 189). Unlike Stanley, Gurnah avoids infernalizing Arabs by basing his account of trade in Swahili historical narratives and adopting the different perspectives of the traders, guides, and porters in the caravan. Far from encountering a homogenous, cultural void or a “putative black purity,” the traders



must negotiate a wide array of cultural difference, as they encounter Indian merchants, Arab city-dwellers, African slave-traders, and tribal villagers, Muslims, Hindus, and indigenous pantheists, not to mention encroaching German imperialists.

Large aspects of Aziz's character echo those of Swahili slave-trader, Tippu Tip, including his racism towards the Indian banyans who finance his caravan, and his buried shame for operating a caravan business instead of running clove plantations. Tip rationalized his exploitation of African tribes with the claim that he was carrying Swahili civilization, *ustaarabu*, from the garden cities of the coast to the interior: "There is no lack of dignity in passing from the abominable yoke of the negro tyrant to the protective tutelage of an Arab [...] The trade has always existed in the interior, and it is the African who does not want it suppressed" (cited in Iliffe 47). Like Tip, whom he invokes in a genealogy of Swahili sultans,<sup>36</sup> Aziz insists that the natives in the interior benefit from commerce: "You'll see some of the places we pass, where people have not yet been brought to life by trade and they live like paralysed insects. There are no people more clever than traders, no calling more noble" (19).

However, he is honest about the Omani Arabs' profit from their exploitation of African peoples. Echoing the Wissmani histories collected by Velten, he narrates the history of trade and Arab dominance in the coastal regions:

When [the Omanis] started to come here, buying slaves from these parts was like picking fruit off a tree. ...There were enough people eager to sell their cousins and neighbours for trinkets [...] Indian merchants gave credit to these Arabs to trade in ivory and slaves....Arabs stole the money and bought slaves from one of the savage sultans near here and made the slaves work in the fields and build comfortable houses for them...After

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<sup>36</sup> Aziz recites, "Another part was called Iturum, [and was given to] to an Arab called Muhammad bin Juma, the father of Hamed bin Muhammad, who was also called Tipu Tip. You've heard of him" (131). Yusuf inquires, "Why was he called Tipu Tip?" (131-2). The question is a sly in-joke, since Brode, Elliott, Livingstone and Stanley all argued that Tip's nickname meant "the one who blinks," referring to a nervous tic. Tip himself insisted that he received the name from a Washenzi tribe whom he subdued with a display of gunfire, and that it mimicked the 'tip-tip' sound of his guns. Yusuf's question evokes the subjectivity of names and identity, particularly when interpreting mediated or politicized histories.

Amir Pasha came Prinzi, the German commander, and he made war at once... He placed the Arabs under his heel at first and then chased them away. The foreigner ground them down so thoroughly they could not even force their slaves to work on their farms any more... Now the Indians have taken over, with the Germans as their lords, and the savages at their mercy.  
(132-3)

Although Aziz is openly critical of German imperial rapacity, he nonetheless demonstrates that pre-colonial East Africa was not an Eden ruptured by the trauma of the colonial encounter, nor a void of history.

Unlike Tip, Aziz is a poor, minor trader who distinguishes between the “vile” slave-trade and the respectable acquisition of ivory or indentured servants: “Trading in slaves is dangerous work, and not honourable” (34). He points out the hypocrisy of the European label “the Arab-slave trade,” recalling that slave markets were open everywhere, not only in Arabia, Persia and Zanzibar, but “down in the south and on the ocean islands where the Europeans were farming for sugar” (132). Nonetheless, his plunder reeks of exploitation. As in *Heart of Darkness*, where the Belgian trading-post gives off “a taint of imbecile rapacity...like a whiff from some corpse”(23), Aziz’s hidden store of smuggled ivory smells of “hide and hoof” and the “foul-mouthed” driver who guards it is “like a creature who had crawled out of a latrine” (70).

At the furthest point of their journey, having crossed the Great Lakes and ventured into the Congo territory, Aziz and his caravan encounter a tribal chief named Chatu, the powerful ruler of a fortified town who controls the ivory-trade in his district.<sup>37</sup> Through Chatu, Gurnah opens space for an empowered African to offer a counter-discourse to the Swahili discourse of trade and exploration. Certain reciprocities existed in the exchange relations between 19<sup>th</sup>-century East Africans and traders. American, Indian and European producers competing to buy ivory,

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<sup>37</sup> Marimbo, another tribal chief, warns Aziz that “[Chatu] can be fierce if he thinks he’s wronged, but he’s a watchful father to his people” (149). Marimbo’s name is an anagrammatic allusion to Mirambo, the famous chief who defeated 2,225 Arabs and was only pacified through the negotiations of Tippu Tip. Numerous tribal chiefs ruled large kingdoms and enjoyed diplomatic relations as equals with the Swahili. Mkwawa, leader of the Hehe, was another powerful chief who led an strategically brilliant five-year guerrilla resistance against the Germans, until they captured him and cut off his head as a trophy.



cloves, hides, and copal had to fulfil specific African tastes in textiles, wire, and beads, and found no market for goods that fell short of Africans' shifting aesthetic standards (Prestholdt 36). Ivory in particular had the power to stabilize and destabilize local chiefs, to secure political influence, and to instigate new patterns of consumption for goods by African societies, shaping the lives of Arab and Swahili traders, African chiefs, middlemen, and slaves (Gibibi 122). Traders depended on local people to provide directions and secure supplies of food and water. However, civil war, slave raids and smallpox epidemics created an unstable atmosphere of mistrust in which the arrival of a caravan could easily provoke violence or war. Traders accused locals of extortion, while locals were enraged by caravan parties which pillaged their villages. Thus, even militarily superior traders were required to carry out rituals and diplomatic ceremonies, *shauri*, in order to overcome mutual distrust and set the stage for negotiations of *hongo* (Pesek 398).<sup>38</sup> A cross between a duty for traversing a ruler's territory and a gift to establish trading relationships, the *hongo* functioned as the "expression of a moral economy" (Pesek 399). Traders bartered down the *hongo* of weaker rulers, but ceded to the demands of powerful chiefs.

When Aziz begins the *shauri* rituals demonstrating his innocent intentions as a trader, Chatu seizes his men and impounds his goods, declaring through his translator:

We will not wait until you have made slaves of us and swallowed up our world. When your like first came to this land you were hungry and naked and we fed you...Then you lied to us and cheated us... Do you think we are beasts that we should go on accepting treatment like that? All these goods produced by the land are ours. So we are taking them away from you. (160)

Unwilling to fight Chatu, Aziz placates him through the flattery of beautiful Yusuf, and has convinced him to return a portion of the wares, when a German

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<sup>38</sup> *Shauri* rituals were characterized by lavish displays of power on both sides: "When caravans entered the residence of an important ruler they paraded in their best clothes, enrolled their flags, fired their muskets, and beat their drums. This was usually answered by a rally of the chief's warriors dancing their war dances and praising their chief" (Pesek 398). These ceremonies also reflected the political and social hierarchies in the interior: and African ruler's power could be measured by the number of warriors and luxury goods he presented.

official suddenly arrives. The official forces Chatu to return all the goods and Aziz to relinquish his guns: “There was no need for guns now that the government had brought order to the land. The guns were only to bring war and capture people” (171). The European suppresses the dialogue between the traders and chief, imposing a simplifying imperialist narrative on their transaction: Chatu, the savage, is stealing from Aziz, the slave-trader. Rather than celebrating, Aziz leaves Chatu’s town “lament[ing] that they had been unable to settle matters between themselves and the sultan” (172). He recognizes that Europeans will disrupt the fluid *shauri* negotiations between traders and locals, supplanting both Swahili and African culture with the “civilization” of the colonizer and monopolizing all future commerce: “Now that the European has arrived there, he will take the whole land” (172).

Gurnah’s characters constantly debate how best to resist the Europeans.<sup>39</sup> While some of the tribal peoples in the interior interpret the coming of the Germans as liberation from the Omanis, Muslim Hussein despairingly anticipates the reduction of Arab and Swahili history to the single narrative of the slave-trade: “They will make [our young people] recite their laws and their story of the world as if it were the holy word. When they come to write about us, what will they say? That we made slaves” (87). Other communities argue that they should learn the language of the invaders and fight back with their technology. Thus, Gurnah reconstructs a multi-layered African historical consciousness and imagines what shape a Swahili oral history critical of the colonial encounter might have taken had it been uncensored and unmediated.

## **Shades of Savagery: The Infernal Other in Paradise**

The relationship of the Afro-Arab traders to the land and its subjects is more complex than that of the European traveller. Rather than a Manichaean split

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<sup>39</sup> The debate between Kalasinga, Hamid and Hussein is characteristic of the polyphony of East African voices advocating various strategies of resistance to European colonization. Kalasinga compares the impending conquest of Africa to British India, and argues that East Africa, lacking the same resources will prove less appealing. Hussein, however, argues that East Africa is valuable as land for white settlers. Kalasinga advocates adopting European knowledge in order to take on their power, but Hussein despairingly predicts the total destruction of Swahili culture (87).



between black/white, European/savage, Arab/African, there are shades of difference signified throughout the narrative. As Yusuf strolls through towns like a flâneur, crossing between “Indian,” “Omani,” and “African” neighbourhoods, his observations constitute an ethnography of cultural difference. He pities the women hidden within strict Muslim houses—“poor creatures...locked within” (49)—and follows a Hindu wedding procession, attracted “by the eloquence of the brocade robes...and scents of ancient provenance” (51). Yusuf himself is alternately defined as savage or civilized according to his place in the complex hierarchy of Arabs, Swahili from the coast, Swahili from the interior, and Africans. His father warns him against playing with Africans who have not converted to Islam: “We are surrounded by savages...Washenzi, who have no faith in God and who worship spirits and demons.” Yet, Khalil identifies him with the Washenzi: “You’re part of that savage country up there” (52). Muslim shopkeeper Hamid urges Yusuf to acquire an Islamic education so that he can be counted among the ranks of the “waungwana,” the “people of honour” from the coast: “If you cannot read His word or follow His law, you are no better than these worshippers of rocks and trees” (99-100). Aziz’s slave-driver, Mohammed Abdalla, makes a similar distinction between coastal Muslims and “savage” animists which reaffirms the correlation between trade and the Islamic civilizing mission: “You’ll come and trade with us, and learn the difference between the ways of civilization and the ways of the savage” (52).

Indigenous Africans provide the “black” Other against which the Swahili measure the shades of their “civilization.” As in European travel narratives, nomadic warriors such as the Masai are subjected to an ethnographic gaze which casts them as simultaneously exotic and “savage”: “Two beaded warriors strode past them, their bodies ochred and sleek...Their hair was groomed into tight plaits and dyed red like the earth” (59). Echoing the medieval Islamic imagination of *Zanj*, “black people,” as cannibals, Aziz’s porters speculate that the Masai eat the penises of their enemies: ““Imagine that God should create creatures like that! They look like something made out of sin”” (59-60).<sup>40</sup> However, the reaction of Aziz’s caravan to the massacre of an African village by another tribe elicits a more complex

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<sup>40</sup> Ibn Al-Wardi and Al-Kazwini locate cannibals in the Isle Saksar, in the Sea of the Zanj.

response. For Abdalla, the slaughter affirms his image of Africans as superstitious, bloodthirsty tribalists, and he refuses to bury their “unclean” bodies: “They will give us diseases...they will turn on us with their superstitions and say we defiled their dead” (27). The Swahili Simba Mwene, however, acknowledges his shared humanity with the victims: “We are their brothers, from the blood of the same Adam who fathered all of us” (127). Yet after performing the funeral rites, Simba stands over the grave, “staring at the villagers with loathing” (129), thus revealing the frailty of the brief moment of cultural equity.

The tale of Gog and Magog, continually retold throughout the novel, is central to the construction of cultural and racial difference. Yusuf first hears it from Khalil, then Hamid and Hussein, and begins to tell his own version after his travels, thus mimicking the way exotic fictions are adapted to contain the disturbing experience of the traveller’s encounters with the Other. When Yusuf describes the paradisaical red land in the interior, Khalil equates its “savage” inhabitants with Gog and Magog and recounts the story of Dhul Qurnain, Iskander the Conqueror:

During his conquest of the world, he was once traveling on the edges of it when he came to some people who told him that to the north of them lived Gog and Magog, brutes who had no language and who ravaged the lands of their neighbors all the time. So Dhul Qurnain built a wall which Gog and Magog could neither climb nor dig through. That is the wall which marks the edge of the world. Beyond that live barbarians and demons. (42)

Khalil correlates his story with Aziz’s walled garden, a miniature version of Iskander’s empire, where walls protect the riches within from the savage without. The sanctity of the artificial walled paradise depends on the construction of the outer landscape and its subjects as infernal. Anxious to assert his position as one of the “civilized” in the narrative of Islamic expansion, Yusuf proclaims himself, “Yusuf the Magnificent, blessed of God, the new Dhul Qurnain, slayer of Gog and Magog!”(41).

However, Gurnah destabilizes the connection between Gog and Magog and the savage Black Other by introducing other versions of the tale. Hamid claims Gog and Magog live to the north, not the west, but he is challenged by another merchant who describes the “uncivilized” Rusi people of the north:



Their savagery made [him] suspect that he was in the country of Gog and Magog, whose borders formed the limit of the land of Islam. But even in this he had a surprise waiting for him...So many of the people who lived in Rusi were Muslims! [His] surprise was shared by these people too, who had never heard of a black man in Africa being a Muslim. (105)

The polarities of black/white, north/south, African/Russian are reversed and disrupted; each thinking the Other is Gog. Gurnah exposes the land of Gog and Magog as an unstable terrain whose boundaries can be shifted to include any traveller's or storyteller's imagination of the unknown, whether north, south, east or west.

Whereas European imperialist discourse opposes "non-native" Arabs against "black" Africans in order to construct "darkest" Africa, in Gurnah's novel, it is the *white* savage who is set up as the polar opposite. Yusuf construes the sun-burn of the German officer who invades his town with an army of askaris as a sign of utter depravity and "cruelty:"

The skin on his face was stretched tight and smooth, as if he had suffered burning or a disease. His smile was a fixed grimace of deformity. His teeth were exposed, as if the tightly stretched flesh on his face had already begun to rot and slough off around his mouth. (245)

In the face of this "cadaver," Khalil leans over to Yusuf and whispers, "Gog and Magog" (246). Victorian quest romances often concluded with an archetypal moment of "narcissistic doubling," when the white protagonist penetrates the interior to discover not the black heart of Africa, but rather the "astonished white face" of a Stanley or a Kurtz (Brantlinger 196).<sup>41</sup> Yusuf's encounter with the

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<sup>41</sup> David Kenosian highlights a reverse "doubling" in the relation between the African *askari* and the German colonizer. German colonial writers faced a problematic of representation: in light of their brutal repression of the East African Maji-Maji rebellion and their massacre of the Herero in Southwest Africa, they could not represent themselves as 'culturally superior to the putatively savage (*fremd und daemonisch*) Africans when they themselves resorted to violent forms of domination" (Kenosian 183). Therefore, they constructed a racial discourse polarizing the animal-like *Schwarzen* and the civilized *Weiss*. However, this Manichean split became destabilized when Africans were conscripted into the army: "Africans begin to take on the outer appearance of Germans by covering their bodies with clothes and even uniforms of the German *Schutztruppe*. ...Colonial power relations [were] threatened when the Germans' desire for recognition [was] supplanted by their desire for the body of the African" (Kenosian 194). Yusuf's reaction to the German officer attributes a *fremd und daemonisch* nature to him, and predicts an ensuing instability in his relationship to his German masters once he dons the askari uniform, and becomes their "double" (Kenosian 182-95).

white specter replaces the perspective of the imperial “see-er” with that of a Swahili seer, giving voice to the African subaltern.<sup>42</sup> If in Victorian literature, the moment of doubling works as a “displacement of guilt for the slave trade, guilt for empire, guilt for....savage and shadowy impulses” (Brantlinger 186), in *Paradise* Yusuf’s confrontation with the German “Magog” signifies the apocalypse which the Koran predicts will follow the re-emergence of Gog and Magog, coinciding with Yusuf’s loss of innocence and expulsion from Aziz’s walled garden.

## Bodies in the Garden: The Eroticization of Paradise

Throughout the novel, Khalil warns Yusuf to abandon his dangerous infatuation with Aziz’s paradise garden. Yet, Yusuf dreams of attaining great wealth and possessing it for himself. The enclosed space enthralls him, seeming to conceal some mystery or beauty, seductive in its very exclusiveness. In the penultimate chapter, “Grove of Desire,” he meets the garden’s hidden singer, Amina, and begins a clandestine affair with her. The erotic paradise with women at its heart is a myth common to Arab-Islamic writing, particularly in the medieval imagination of Wâq al-wâq. Like El Dorado, Wâq al-wâq is a land of excessive riches, whose inhabitants fashion chains for their dogs and collars for their monkeys from pure gold. Al-Wardi’s *Kharida* describes the peculiar sexual produce of the island’s trees:

Fruit-like women, with shapes, bodies, eyes, hands, feet, hair. Breasts, and vulvas like the vulvas of women. They are the most beautiful of face and hang by their hair. They come out of cases like big swords and when they feel the wind and sun, they yell, ‘Waq Waq,’ until their hair tears apart. [...] The land of these women is the best of lands, with most of it scented.

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<sup>42</sup> Gurnah’s most recent novel *Desertion* returns to the traditional scene of first encounter between the East African and the White Man, but reverses the iconography of colonial fiction, so that the European, not the African, becomes the source of the tall tale, of marvelous or derogatory speculation. The novel opens in 1899 in a small coastal town near Mombasa, when a ragged European appears out of the wilderness and collapses at the feet of devout Muslim Hassanali. Thinking the European is a “shadow or a ghoul,” Hassanali reverses the European expectation of meeting cannibals or monsters. It is the European who is the “savage Other” stumbling out of the interior, dressed in “uncivilized” clothes. Hassanali sees his colonial attire as a “costume” enabling him to play the ‘heroic’ role of imperial adventurer, despite his complete helplessness. This passage echoes the bemusement recorded by Tippu Tip in his autobiography when he first met the violently ill explorer Cameron in the interior and mocked Cameron’s tattered European clothes in comparison to his own immaculate robes.



It also has rivers whose water is sweeter than honey and melted sugar...A great torrential stream flows like tar from some of these islands to the sea, burning the fish, which then float on the water. (cited in Malti-Douglas 88)

The women-fruit are images of transgression with their provocatively-bared genitals and their orgasmic cry. When their hair tears, they fall to the ground and rot, though the man who cuts one down can "find a great pleasure in her, not be found in normal women" (88). The infernal burning waters which bound the island betray the violence of this fantasy of total control over women's sexuality. Wâq al-wâq is the ultimate paradise of consumption, transforming women into self-destructing, disposable commodities.<sup>43</sup>

Fedwa Malti-Douglas suggests that the erotic commodification of women in the Wâq al-wâq myth stems from the "sexual and liquid" aspects of the Koranic paradise, which constructs the garden for the ultimate sexual satisfaction of men (91). In Gurnah's novel, the exclusivity of Aziz's paradise garden depends on his regulation of the sexuality of the women concealed within it. Yusuf's idealized image of Amina as a paradisaal houri is shattered when he discovers her history of sexual and physical exploitation: "When she was seven years old, my poor stupid Ba...offered her to the seyyid as part of the payment of his debt. [...] When that devil Mohammed Abdalla came to collect us, he made her undress and stroked her with his filthy hands" (230-1). Amina is reduced to a commodity in the trade between men, signifying the degraded exchange relations of the larger Indian Ocean economy, in which women and men became the raw materials fuelling plantation economies and domestic slavery. Like the women-fruit of Wâq al-wâq, she is sent to ripen in Aziz's paradise garden until she is ready to be "consumed." Khalil thinks that becoming Aziz's wife will "wipe away her shame," but the marriage only intensifies her oppression: "The seyyid likes to say that most of the occupants of Heaven are the poor and most of the occupants of Hell are women. If there is Hell on earth, then it is here" (228-9). The artificial paradise not only constructs hell on its borders, but is hell within.

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<sup>43</sup> On other islands of women in the Arab imaginary, women ride horses, fight wars, have sex with male slaves, or threaten to kill male visitors, thus revealing deep anxieties about the control of women's bodies, sexualities, and subjectivities. Wâq al-wâq is constructed as a paradise by comparison with these false or infernal islands, since "the only island where the male can be assured of safety is where it is the women-fruit who die" (Malti-Douglas 95).

Confronted with Amina's misery, Yusuf imagines rejecting servitude in favor of exile and individual autonomy: "There would be no walled garden there, wherever we go... It would be like banishment, but how could it be worse than this?" (233-4). He finally realizes that the artificial paradise is a product of unequal social structures, that paradise itself is "a notion which enters the economy of control and exchange, a tool used by those in power to entertain and give false hope to those without power, those... for whom only the stories offer a possible realm of escape or hope" (Callahan 67-68). Yet he still fantasizes that he and Amina will go forth like Adam and Eve to "build a garden of their own" (234) in the wilderness, until he is thwarted by "Mistress," Aziz's first wife, Zulekha. Like Potiphar's wife, Zulekha seduces Yusuf to lay hands on her.<sup>44</sup> When he hesitates, she seizes him in a fit of passion. Fleeing, Yusuf is overcome by disgust and anger:

He had done nothing shameful, it was the way they had forced him to live, forced them all to live, which was shameful. Their intrigues and hatreds and vengeful acquisitions had forced even simple virtues into tokens of exchange and barter. (236)

His anger is a product of his feeling of complicity with an exploitative economy and of the buried realization that he himself is one of the commodities of exchange, treated by his masters as an eroticized, but emasculated possession. He is the object of desire, the "beautiful young boy," but not permitted to express desire for another.<sup>45</sup> His beauty is metonymic of paradise, of African beauty, of the land itself, pursued by everyone (Callahan 67): "Everyone wants Yusuf" (159). His status as "rehani," effectively pawned to Aziz until his father can pay off his debt, recalls contemporary Tanzania, where there seems little prospect of

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<sup>44</sup> Lemuel Johnson remarks that "From Roman and Sabeian to Hebrew and 'pagan,' ...the vision of a virtually intransitive, contingently disruptive Woman has ever been (in) the way of idealizing the condition of the (patriarchal) Elect in their New Worlds, of Gardens of Delectation" (689).

<sup>45</sup> Aziz and Mohammed Abdalla incessantly joke about using him sexually, warning him to be careful of rape, whether by a man, a savage, or an ugly older woman. Yusuf's sexual desire first surfaces when he tells stories to Hamid's daughter. During these storytelling sessions, she sits in his lap, arousing him: "In the many silent hours he had to himself he hated himself and feared what would happen to him if they were discovered" (108). The potential of storytelling to arouse dangerous desires is thus related to the erotic nature of paradisaic fantasies. Yusuf is deeply disturbed by his own emergent sexuality, unsure of how to practice it safely within his role as an eroticized young slave.



ever repaying IMF debts (Lewis 220). He yearns to tell Aziz that it is wrong “to own people the way you own us,” but he is unable to “make himself say the words” (241). Instead, he becomes a ‘kisser of hands,’ and calls Aziz *seyyid*, acknowledging his role in the master-slave relationship, one that will be ironically replaced by colonial servitude when he joins the German army. His failure to speak out against Aziz or the German lieutenant who conscripts him is ironic since in the Koran it is Yusuf who speaks truth to Pharaoh and saves his people.

## Shame, Complicity, and Fall: From Paradise to Hell

“Walikuja wakangi	They entered the mosques
na majibwa yao pia	With their great dogs too
Liwali akakimbia	And the governor had fled
Asihimili	He could not bear to remain”

- Hamedi bin Abdallah el Buhriy, “Utenzi wa Vita” (1960)

The novel concludes with Yusuf’s identification with a pack of feral dogs eating the piles of excrement left behind by the German askaris:

Their bodies shifted slightly to shield their food from his covetous gaze. He looked for a moment in astonishment, surprised at this squalid recognition. The dogs had known a shit-eater when they saw one. [...] Now, as he watched the obviously degraded hunger of the dogs, he thought he knew what it would grow into. The marching column was still visible when he heard a noise like the bolting of doors behind him in the garden. He lanced round quickly and then ran after the column with smarting eyes. (247)

The dogs are spectres of Yusuf’s abjection, but also of the German imperialists who relentlessly hunger to possess Tanganyika, symbolized by the wolf-men who will overwhelm the Muslim Gehenna on the Day of Judgment, devouring “the sinful people who don’t obey Allah” (29).<sup>46</sup> The bolting of the garden doors thus signifies Yusuf’s expulsion from Aziz’s false “paradise” into a “hell” of imperial rapacity. Yet the exilic logic of the paradise motif means that Yusuf’s exit offers

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<sup>46</sup> “After Kiyama, after the day the world ends the wolf-men will live in the first layer of Hell, thousands and thousands of them, and they’ll eat the sinful people who don’t obey Allah” (29).

little promise of re-emergence out of the oppressive relations between colonizer-colonized, and paradoxically reinforces the notion of the colonial encounter as an apocalyptic temporal divide.

Yusuf is paralyzed by his sense of individual alienation from all the ethnic groups and forms of power in East Africa, and feels powerless to formulate resistance to the systems which threaten to consume him:

The seyyid could travel deep into strange lands...armed only with bags of trinkets and a sure knowledge of his superiority. The white man in the forest feared nothing as he sat under his flag, ringed by armed soldiers. But Yusuf had neither a flag nor righteous knowledge...he thought he understood that the small world he knew was the only one available to him. (237)

His traumatic realization of subalternity seems fixed in the discursive logic of fall and loss produced by the paradise motif. His decision to join the ruthless Germans could be seen as mere complicity with a newer, more brutal form of power than that of the Omani Arabs, yet another phase in the degraded economy of exchange: Joseph saving his people from starvation only to lead them into new captivity in Egypt.

However, it could also be read as a refusal to conform to the degradation of his current state, rejecting one form of servitude by negotiating a limited agency in another sphere. In the German colonial army, askaris received access to education, however didactic (Ploeg 100). Furthermore, the practice of slave-ransoming in German Ostafrika allowed slaves to seize some control over their own emancipation: "On the eve of colonial rule, and when colonial rule was weak, slaves, who lived within the 'interstices' and 'crevices' of society, used their leverage to widen those crevices and carve out greater realms of autonomy" (Sunseri 481). Armed with a dawning awareness of the global historical processes impacting his local world, Yusuf chooses a new way to forge ahead in the wider world, with all the problems that entails. The logic of the paradise myth thus competes with the messianic trajectory of the Joseph-story, which promises eventual exodus from the Egypt of colonialism, even if the nation will wander in the wilderness for forty years after independence falls short of initial expectations.



Gurnah has described his writing as negotiating between competing histories of the colonial and the postcolonial in favour of a conception of East African history as a “complex,” “indeterminate” space (Walder par. 4). Throughout *Paradise*, Gurnah undermines the representation of 19<sup>th</sup>-century East Africa as prelapsarian or even pre-colonial, revealing instead a world of economic desperation and violent exchange which has been the object of multiple, heterogeneous incursions over the centuries: African, Persian, Indian, Portuguese, Omani, German, Indian. In an interview, Gurnah outlines his intention to portray “the true complexities and difficulties of the negotiations that had to take place for [...] unstable societies to live alongside each other”:

Such a complicated balancing act between different societies—the very reason that the coastal regions are so vulnerable when European imperialism comes—is because the society is already at full stretch. All sorts of cruelties existed within it...Cruelties against women, cruelties against children, cruelties against those people that you see as weak...I didn’t simply want to say ‘Look, it worked before the European colonial encounter’ but instead, ‘Look how hard it had to try to work and look at the kind of things it had to do to make itself work.’ (Nasta 361)

Omani attempts to create an East African coastal empire were poisoned by injustices: the degradation of women, the slave-trade, the plundering of the interior, the violence committed between Muslims and non-Muslim Africans. Gurnah’s novel exposes the various hells manufactured by the infestation of “longings,” religious, cultural, and economic, which provoked colonization, mercantilism and expansion in East Africa. His sophisticated use of multiple perspectives in the various tales narrated by different characters reveals the double-edged nature of story-telling and representation. The loci and tropes of paradise are shown to be imbedded in political and economic discourse, transforming places of mystical pilgrimage into lands of conquest.

Having admitted to writing for an audience outside Tanzania due to the lack of publishing outlets, Gurnah could be accused of filling his narrative with exotic literary references in order to appeal to a Western audience eager to consume a literary account of Zanzibar as a paradise teeming with “spices, slaves, and

sands.”<sup>47</sup> Yet, in its vibrant use of a pastiche of African oral narrative and Islamic literary styles, the novel performs a joyful reclaiming of the rich and complex cultural and literary traditions of coastal East Africa. Gurnah rejects the artificiality of an aesthetic which constructs nation as paradise, while still trying to preserve the power of longing, imagination and story-telling. Yusuf is described as a potential prophet and healer throughout the novel; Gurnah suggests he can only heal when he learns to tell the right stories, to dream in a way that reveals and interprets, like his Koranic namesake, the realities of his historical situation, rather than occluding them further in fantasy.

However, the question remains whether a project of cultural reclamation is enough to resist political apathy and the disruption of Tanzania’s local economy by leviathan financial markets. The degraded exchange relations of *Paradise*, in which Yusuf’s attempts to work out “humanized protocols of trade” (Callahan 67) are doomed to failure by the advent of European imperialism, seem revelatory of Tanzania’s current relation to multinational capitalism. The novel’s concluding tone of paralysis and nostalgia predicts the “lack of faith in communal, political action at the national level” (Lewis 228) which characterizes Gurnah’s later works such as *Desertion* (2006), where his protagonist rejects the “pared-down polarities and uncluttered certainties” (222) of politically narrow nationalism and mourns the fragmentation of local cultures under globalization: ““Everything is scattered, dispersed to the farthest corners of the world” (261). Frantz Fanon wrote that “National consciousness, which is not nationalism, is the only thing that will give us an international dimension” (199). Gurnah embraces international consciousness, but discards national and ethnic categories of belonging. Yusuf’s limited seizure of agency may gesture towards the possibility that individual, grassroots organization might mobilize resistance and provide basic services more effectively than national organizations (Lewis 228); however, such a gesture still falls short of crystallizing a new liberation discourse.

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<sup>47</sup> At the 2006 press conference for the launch of Gurnah’s *Desertion* in Zanzibar, I talked to a local journalist from a daily paper in Dar-es-Salaam, who said it was difficult to buy his novels in bookstores, since there wasn’t a “reading culture” in Tanzania due to the expense of books and declining literacy. On Zanzibar, the Gallery bookshop which opened in June 2006 is the first store on the island to sell only books, and it caters mostly to tourists. The manager told me, “I just hope we can sell enough books to keep it open.” *Desertion* sells for the Western price of 16,000 Tz—almost \$16—unaffordable for the average Tanzanian.



## Chapter 5

### Taprobane, Serendib, Adam's Peak: Ceylon as Spiritual/Material Paradise

"Below us a green emerald glows,  
dangling temptation, dazzling every  
voracious conquistador to come hither"

- Yvonne Gunawardena, "Coming in to Land" (1996)

"To me the beauty of Ceylon lies not so much in its blue seas and golden beaches, its jungles and its mountain peaks, as in its ancient atmosphere. There is no nation, from Egypt of the Pharaohs to modern Britain, in whose literature this island has not at some time been mentioned by one or other of its many names—Lanka, Serendib, Taprobane, Ceilao, Zeilan, to recall a few. History lies buried in its sands, and ghosts of romance lurk among its bastioned rocks, for Lanka is very, very old."

- D. J. G. Hennessy, *Green Aisles* (1949)

Ceylon, like Zanzibar, has a paradisaical reputation linked to its strategic trading position in the Indian Ocean, as well as its concentration of precious stones and spices.<sup>1</sup> If Zanzibar was the paradise of cloves and ivory, Ceylon is the paradise of rubies and cinnamon, the "Pearl upon the Brow of India," the "Jewel Box of the Indian Ocean." However, Ceylon is also singular in possessing a mythical site of origins, the mountain of Sri Pada, venerated by four major religions. The 6<sup>th</sup>-century Buddhist chronicle, the *Mahavamsa*, describes how Buddha landed on the mountain and found it inhabited by *yakkas*, or demons, as the aboriginals were described. He gave a mighty stamp upon the peak to scatter the *yakkas*, leaving behind the sacred

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<sup>1</sup> The affinity between cinnamon and Ceylon can be seen in the derivation of the spice's botanical name: *Cinnamomum zeylanicum*. Throughout this chapter, I will use the Anglophone colonial name of Ceylon, since I am referring to the genealogy of representations of the island before it became an independent nation and assumed the name Sri Lanka.

imprint of his foot. For Muslims, this shallow impression belongs to Adam, the first man and prophet, who landed on one foot on the holy peak when he was cast out from Eden and granted refuge in the "paradise of Adam." For Hindus, whose epic *Ramayana* narrates the flight of Rama to Sri Lanka, the footprint is that of the god Shiva. For early Christian visitors, the footprint was that of Adam or of St. Thomas, the first missionary to the subcontinent, and the mountain, *Pico de Adam*, or Adam's Peak, was the gateway to Eden.<sup>2</sup>

In medieval accounts, Ceylon is imagined both as a religious site of origins and as a land of material riches whose wealth is a sign of its sacred nature. Mandeville's *Travels* conflates Ceylon with Taprobane, the Greco-Roman "Garden of Delights."<sup>3</sup> Situating the island between Prester John's kingdom and the Earthly Paradise, Mandeville imagines the country of "good Christian men" (184) as a treasure-land where giant ants harvest gold for humans.<sup>4</sup> This fantasy of work-free production in which a lower species labours for higher man reflects the conflation of the spiritual and the material which is a unique characteristic of the topos of Ceylon, distinguishing it from the Manichean emphasis surrounding Zanzibar, fair land/black coast, or from the crass materialism of El Dorado, city of gold. In Pali, the language

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<sup>2</sup> Giovanni de Marignolli, a Florentine cleric travelling in Asia between 1338-1353, "discovers" Adam's Peak, "so close to the earthly paradise that from its top one could see paradise were it not for the cloud cover that hides it from view. One morning, however, just before sunrise, he was granted a momentary glimpse...it was as bright as a flame of fire. The natives told him, moreover, that it was possible at times to hear the noise made by the waters of Eden before they divided into the four rivers" (cited in Delumeau 97). The more sceptical Marco Polo describes Ceylon in his *Travels* (1295), emphasizing the shared holy reputation of the "tomb of Adam, our first parent": "Such is the account given by the Saracens. But the idolaters assert that it contains the body of Sogomon-barchan, the founder of their religious system, and whom they revere as a holy personage" (237).

<sup>3</sup> Amongst early geographers, Ceylon's location provoked confusion similar to the debate over the terrestrial paradise. The Greco-Romans could not decide whether copper-coloured Taprobane was the island of Ceylon, a separate continent, another hemisphere, or even another world. Strabo locates fabulous Taprobane as an island directly west of Africa, near Ethiopia, while Ptolemy's map (139 AD) depicts an immense, continental island far to the east of India.

<sup>4</sup> "In this isle of Ceylon are great hills of gold, which ants busily look after, purifying the gold and separating the fine from the unfine" (184). Mandeville's fantasy of labour-free wealth ironically predicts the plantations, pearl-fisheries, and cinnamon gardens which the British would set up centuries later, using indentured labour on stolen land. The myth of the gold-digging ants of Indus can be traced as far back as Herodotus in the 5<sup>th</sup> century. Mandeville's repetition and relocation of the myth to Ceylon is reflective of the cumulative, formulaic genre of early travel writing, which far from being truthful *reportage*, encouraged borrowing, mistranslation, and the multiplication of errors (Bailey-Goldschmidt 147).



of Buddhist ritual, the island was known as “Sinhalam,” or “place of jewels.”<sup>5</sup> Early Chinese travellers praised the beauty of “Pa-outchow”, the isle of gems. They reverentially attributed the sacred footmark to the first created man, “Pawn-koo,” and claimed that the gemstones on the holy mountain were his crystallised tears, a myth later adopted by Christian writers.<sup>6</sup>

The 5<sup>th</sup> century Chinese monk, Fa-Hien, who travelled throughout Asia in search of the Buddhist Books of Wisdom, emphasized Ceylon’s centrality in the Indian Ocean trade routes and described the spread of myths about the island’s fertility as the result of the trade in gemstones between the “wicked nagas” (aboriginals) and Arab merchants.<sup>7</sup> Medieval Arab sailors called the island “Tenerisim,” the isle of delight, and geographers such as Al-Mas’udi gave marvellous accounts of “Serendib’s” riches, inspiring the tale of Sinbad’s sixth voyage,<sup>8</sup> in which Sinbad is shipwrecked and stunned by the commodities flung across the island’s shores:

It is impossible to tell what a quantity of goods and riches we found cast ashore there. [...] Here a great river of fresh water runs out of the sea into a dark cave, whose entrance is very high and large. What is most remarkable in this place is that the stones of the mountain are of crystal, rubies, or other precious stones. (Dixon 1.14)

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<sup>5</sup> This name for the island later metamorphosed into *Senendiva* (diva for island) and *Silandiva*, which became *Serendib* in Arabic, was contracted to *Ceilao* by the Portuguese and to *Zeilan* or *Ceilan* by the Dutch and to *Ceylon* by the British. The Tamils called the island *Ilanare*.

<sup>6</sup> Medieval Europeans lifted the Chinese myth of Pawn-koo’s tears crystallizing into gems and adapted it in Christian terms. The 14<sup>th</sup>-century Venetian traveller, Friar Odoric claimed he “saw the mountain on which Adam for the space of 500 years mourned the death of Abel, and on which his tears and those of Eve formed, as men believed, a fountain,” but employed a moralizing geography to undermine the Buddhist idyll, portraying the river as infernal, its waters “flowing over jewels, but abounding with leeches and blood-suckers” (cited in Tennent 637). Similarly, in *Mirabilia* (1323), Jordon of Séverac describes Ceylon as abounding with “creatures out of paradise,” and tells of a miraculous pond that turns whatever it touches to gems (cited in Delumeau 98). In the early modern age, the medieval habit of representing paradise’s beauty and purity in terms of precious commodities transformed into the idea that commodities were paradise-in-themselves.

<sup>7</sup> According to Fa-Hien’s *Record of Buddhist Kingdoms*, the arrival of Buddha interrupted the commerce in gemstones between Arab merchants and the aboriginal Veddas, sacralizing the “seven precious substances” so that they were no longer traded by “wicked nagas,” but used by Buddhists to create religious shrines.

<sup>8</sup> Sinbad’s voyages were first included in the 1001 Arabian Nights in Galland’s translation; they had existed in heterogeneous, constantly transforming variations previous to Galland’s inclusion, dating from as early as the 8<sup>th</sup> century. The tales constitute a kind of merchant guidebook of medieval Arab sailors’ knowledge about the Indian Ocean.

After great trials of thirst and starvation, Sinbad makes a raft, loads it with “rubies, emeralds, ambergris, rock-crystal, and rich stuffs,” and sails to rescue through the mountain-cave into a hidden kingdom of “blacks.” He is entertained by the king of Serendib, and climbs the Holy Mountain, “by way of devotion,” before departing with his riches.<sup>9</sup>

The 14<sup>th</sup>-century traveller Ibn Battutah similarly juxtaposed spiritual purpose with material desire, interspersing his account of pilgrimage to “the blessed Foot, the Foot of Adam” (Mackintosh-Smith 244) with covetous descriptions of the precious stones found “in all parts” of Serendib (246),<sup>10</sup> and contrasting the “natural” signs bearing witness to Allah at Adam’s Peak with the material riches offered to Buddha:

On [the mountain] there are many evergreen trees and flowers of various colours, including a red rose as big as the palm of a hand. They maintain that on these roses there is writing, in which can be read the name of Allah and the name of His Apostle. [...] In the rock where the Foot is there are nine holes cut out, in which the infidel pilgrims place offerings of gold, rubies and pearls.  
(248)

The implication in both Sinbad’s tale and Battutah’s description that the idolatrous natives waste the island’s precious commodities is a rhetorical position common not only to Arabic accounts of Ceylon, but to Portuguese, Dutch, and British colonizers, who would all argue in turn that their variety of mercantilism or empire would make the best use of the island’s resources.

Following Peter Hulme’s argument in *Colonial Encounters* that colonial discourse differs according to temporality and geography, a central distinction can be made between colonial representations of Ceylon and America. Instead of erecting Edenic edifices of a “New” World, representations of the long-familiar Ceylon focus on the distribution and control of its resources and the conquest of its unknown interior:

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<sup>9</sup> “I made, by way of devotion, a pilgrimage to the place where Adam was confined after his banishment from Paradise and had the curiosity to go to the top of the mountain” (Dixon 1.14).

<sup>10</sup> “All women in the island...have necklaces of rubies...and wear them also on their arms and legs in place of bracelets and anklets...I have seen on the forehead of the white elephant seven ruby stones each larger than a hen’s egg, and...a ruby bowl as large as a man’s hand....” (Mackintosh-Smith 246).



“The driving impulse is not the legitimating strategies necessary to ‘empty’ the land of its people.... The colonial form is based primarily on the control of trade, whether or not accompanied by a colonial administration” (Jayawickrama 105). Ceylon’s history was characterized by waves of mercantilism and partial colonization. Arab merchants were the first to colonize the coasts, setting up fortified trading posts in order to monopolize the spice and gem trade, as they had in East Africa. However, their influence was essentially maritime, never extending to the interior where the Sinhalese kingdom of Kandy lay unchallenged.<sup>11</sup> Sinbad’s fantastic journey into the hidden kingdom thus reflects the limits of Arab knowledge of the island and desire for its interior. European colonization occurred in successive stages. The Portuguese landed on the island in 1505 and wrested control of Galle in 1587, erecting forts along the coast in the attempt to secure mercantile and military dominance of Indian Ocean.<sup>12</sup> In 1640, the Dutch, empowered by the growing strength of the V.O.C., seized the Fort of St. Cruz at Galle and erected their own ramparts.<sup>13</sup> However, like the Portuguese and the Arabs before them, they were unable to conquer the internal Kandyan kingdom and were forced to sign a treaty with the king of Kandy.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Kandyans cannily protected their kingdom from invasion by surrounding it with a dense belt of tropical jungle. The only entry was through mountain passes, protected by thorn gates, through which only one man could pass at a time and which could be easily defended by a handful of Sinhalese. Unable to penetrate the jungle, the Arabs, Portuguese, and Dutch sent ambassadors into the kingdom, many of whom never returned, held captive by the king, Raja Singh. Many would-be conquistadors in search of “Conde Uva” died of fever, like their Spanish counterparts on quest for El Dorado.

<sup>12</sup> In addition to the African topoi of Prester John’s kingdom and Ophir, the literature of Portuguese discovery in the 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> centuries employs a series of paradisaical topoi associated with Ceylon. Luís Vaz de Camões’ *The Lusiads* (1572) famously opens in praise of the “illustrious men” who “Sailed from the western Lusitanian shores/On seas never theretofore navigated/Way beyond Taprobane.” The Lusophone colonial library contains numerous histories of Ceilão, including João de Barros’ *Decades of Asia* (1552), João dos Santos’ *Ethiopia Oriental* (1609), João Ribeiro’s *The Historic Tragedy of the Island of Ceilão* (1685), and Father Fernão de Queiroz’s *The Temporal and Spiritual Conquest of Ceilão* (1686). Ribeiro’s and Queiroz’s massive, encyclopaedic works provided a model for later Anglophone writing about Ceylon. Written retrospectively, they express profound nostalgia for the relinquished colony: Queiroz mourns the loss of “the land of Eden,” attributing the Dutch conquest as “the arm of God...raised against the Portuguese” for their crimes against the Tamils.

<sup>13</sup> Rev. Phillip Baldeus accompanied the Dutch invasion in northern Jaffna and wrote extensively about the lives of Jaffna Tamils in his *Description of the Isle of Ceylon* (1672). Francois Valentijn’s massive *Description of Ceylon* (1724) provides another crucial documentation of colonial Dutch history, and was used extensively as a sourcebook by the British in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>14</sup> In the Treaty of Kandy (1638), the Dutch formed an alliance with the Kandyans against Spanish-ruled Portugal, and promised to wage a war to evict the Portuguese, with all expenses to be paid by Raja Singh. However, the King did not have enough money or spices to pay off the extortionate debt, and the Dutch cleverly exploited the treaty to keep the forts and lands they had captured as compensation for the balance of payments, thus extending their colonial influence.

Ceylon's heart remained occult, a space which travellers longed to penetrate, like Sinbad, in hopes of accessing unimaginable riches and establishing dominion. Paradisal tropes mapped this *tabulae Asiae* into a transnational imaginary of gold-lands: "Taprobane, like El Dorado, Ultimate Thule and Atlantis, was a touchstone for the geographical imagination" (Abeydeera 2). Europeans did not invent paradise myths of Ceylon on the eve of colonization, but rather, colonial desire was stimulated by fantasies produced by previous empires and mercantile interests. Throughout this chapter, I will analyze key Anglophone representations of Ceylon, starting in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, showing how Ceylon's mythic significance as both a spiritual and a material paradise helped spur the development of British colonial desire and the British East India Company.

## Writing Colonial Desire: Early British Knowledge of Ceylon

"This island was a paradise to be sacked."

- Michael Ondaatje, *Running in the Family* (1983)

In 1589, William Ralph Fitch, a London merchant sailor, became the first Englishman to visit Portuguese Ceilao. Fitch's description of his journey, collected in Hakluyt's compendium of travel writing, "diligently" sets down "the exceeding rich trade and commodities" (19) in the "fruitfull and faire" island (18). In earlier medieval accounts, desire for the island's resources focused around its gemstones, ivory, and wood; cinnamon was rarely mentioned because it was not yet recognized as a valuable commodity. However, by the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the European craving for spices had awoken, and thus Fitch emphasizes "sweet" "Cinamon wood" alongside rubies, sapphires, and pearls. Similarly, in his catalogue of Ceylon's natural resources, from metals and jewels, to rivers, fruits and cinnamon, 17<sup>th</sup>-century armchair traveller Samuel Purchas represents Ceylon as a cornucopia of "worldy treasures and pleasures": "Sense and sensualitie haue here stumbled on a Paradise" (458).<sup>15</sup> The

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<sup>15</sup> Samuel Purchas was an armchair navigator who edited Richard Hakluyt's compendium of travel writing and produced his own: *Purchas, His Pilgrimage* (1613).



Indian travels collected by Richard Hakluyt and Samuel Purchas spurred the development of the British East India Company in rivalry to the Dutch V.O.C., employing extravagant tropes of commerce and consumption to describe the untapped riches of South Asia (Teltscher 12).

British desire was further titillated by the story of Robert Knox, an English sailor who was kidnapped by the Kandyan king Raja Sinha and held captive in the Kandyan kingdom for 17 years. Knox's *Historical Relation* (1681) combines spiritual autobiography, travel writing and ethnography in his aim to reveal the "inland parts" of "Ceilon" which are as yet "new and unknown unto these European Nations"(1). While other critics have focused on the autobiography's sympathy to Sinhalese culture, Jayawickrama argues that the text is "generated through the complex needs of Britain's political and commercial aspirations in the East, providing a preliminary fund of information of invaluable strategic importance to the East India Company and Britain, in an enterprise which was initially only commercially oriented but would ultimately lead to the conquest of the Kandyan kingdom, and the whole island of Ceylon in the latter half of the eighteenth century" (286). Although Knox did not "discover" a "New World," he did enter a "hidden" world, and the knowledge which he produces of Ceylon—its commodities, its landscapes, its peoples, its fetishized interior—is commercially valuable.<sup>16</sup> He makes a staggering list of untapped resources: rubies, sapphires, iron, crystal, salt-peter, steel, ebony, "cardamum, jaggory, rack, oyl, black lead, turmeric, salt, rice, bettel-nuts, musk, wax, pepper," the "peculiar Commodity of the Island, Cinnamon," wild cattle, honey, "elephants teeth," and cotton, claiming that "All these things the Land affords, and it might do it in much greater quantity, if the People were but laborious and industrious" (61). Knox's account, like Hakluyt's *Voyages*, became standard issue on East India Company

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<sup>16</sup> This point is emphasized in Robert Hooke's 1681 preface, which dedicates *Historical Relation* to the British East India Company, who financed its printing, and emphasizes Knox's contribution to the British project to incorporate the East and the West Indies into a system of knowledge which would facilitate colonial administration and profit: "'Tis much to be wondred that we should to this Day want a good History of most of our West-Indian Plantations. [...] 'Tis to be hoped that...this present Work, may excite several other Ingenuous, and knowing Men to follow...Captain Knox who though he could bring away nothing almost upon his Back or in his Purse, did yet Transport the whole Kingdom of Conde Uda in his Head" (v-vi).

expeditions, and anticipated, a century in advance, the central dynamic of British exploration in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when explorers would become obsessed with mapping interiors rather than newly “discovered” lands. His privileged position as an ethnographical observer of the “hidden” Kandyan kingdom “afforded him an opportunity for ‘mapping the contents of the land,’ long before such an enterprise became feasible or possible in places like Africa” (Jayawickrama 106).

Yet, Knox’s discursive attempts to capture the kingdom sit uneasily with his lack of material power. Because he is a captive rather than a conquistador, he cannot imagine Ceylon through the terms of colonial mastery and refrains from using the trope of “earthly paradise.” Instead, his account stresses the economic potential of the island, as yet unfilled, while devaluing its spiritual significance as an Edenic site of religious origins. Knox condemns the “laziness” (21) of the Kandyans and argues that they are oppressed by their “tyrant” king, but implies that they would be happy to be liberated and introduced to the principles of capitalist industry (32). Furthermore, he deplores the idolatrous religions of the island—animism, Hinduism, Buddhism, syncretistic Catholicism—while employing the devices of spiritual autobiography to construct his own subjectivity in terms of a “civilized” Protestant work ethic which stands in contrast to the “uncivilized” sloth of the Sinhalese.<sup>17</sup> Knox thus lays the rhetorical groundwork for the British colonization of Ceylon in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. While the British attitude to the spirituality of the island would change in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when Orientalist scholars came to see it as a paradise of Eastern religion, Knox’s superimposition of Puritan, capitalist values over myths of the island’s paradisaal abundance created an early rationale for British conquest.

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<sup>17</sup> Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) was partly inspired by Knox’s account of the intellectual and spiritual resources he employed to survive his “isle of despair:” prayer, reading the Bible, building a house, mapping the contours of the kingdom, preparing a history in his head. He urges his fellow captive Englishmen to enter a pact with him to forego intercourse with native women, and instead dedicate themselves to Puritan values and meaningful employment. Knox’s sexual abstinence is, like the spectre of cannibalism for Crusoe, the manifestation of his fear at “going native” and being incorporated by the Other whom he is at such pains to delineate and categorize. Although Selkirk’s South Sea island provides the geographical model for Crusoe’s island, Knox’s autobiography is a likely inspiration for Robinson’s psychology.



In 1796, the British seized Ceylon from the Dutch, and in 1798 Ceylon officially became a Crown Colony. In a parliamentary speech in 1802, William Pitt the Younger described Ceylon “as the most valuable colonial possession on the globe,” not only because of its commercial resources but because of the strategic natural harbors which made it the “link in the chain which was going to bind India and the East to British domination of the seas” (Jayawickrama 7). The colony’s value was physically symbolized in the 400-carat Ceylonese blue sapphire adorning Queen Victoria’s crown, and soon inspired a large body of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>-century Anglophone travel writing, accentuated by its crown colony status, its accessibility and prosperity, and its long history of European inhabitation. This literary corpus has been critically marginalized in comparison to the immense canon of writing about India. Ceylon is often treated as an extension of the subcontinent, with colonial society and attitudes following the same patterns as those in literature of the Raj. It is true that Ceylon’s geographical relation to the subcontinent is not one of uncontested insularity, but rather characterized by centuries of cultural interchange catalyzed by waves of migrations of different peoples from the subcontinent. However, to view writing about Ceylon as secondary to the canon of the subcontinent is to place colonial India and Ceylon in a false hierarchy which obscures the specificity of both discursive and material colonial practice in Ceylon, where plantations dominated the economy, unlike India.

### **Milking the Crown Colony: 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Ceylon as Garden of Empire**

Analysis of colonial discourse about Ceylon must address the familiar tropes it borrowed from the Orientalist canon, but also how it adapted these tropes and invented new ones in order to categorize what appeared “unique” about Ceylon. In the early stages of British rule, Ceylon was frequently imagined as a fallen paradise in need of recuperation, riddled by the inefficient laws and abuses of former colonial powers and by idolatrous religions, both Catholic and native. Bishop Reginald

Heber's imperial hymn, "From Greenland's Icy Mountains" (1819), cited *ad nauseum* in missionary and travel writing,<sup>18</sup> most succinctly captures this attitude:

What though the spicy breezes blow soft o'er Ceylon's isle;  
Though every prospect pleases, and only man is vile;  
In vain with lavish kindness the gifts of God are strown;

The heathen in his blindness bows down to wood and stone. ("Hymns" 80)<sup>19</sup>  
As I will demonstrate, Anglophone uses of paradisal tropes differ according to the writer's relation to power, oscillating and fluctuating according to political agenda, aesthetic project, social position and cultural context. Early 19<sup>th</sup>-century writers frequently complained that the British had failed to exploit their new Crown colony to its fullest potential, using the paradise motif to advocate colonial reform.

In "Ceylon" (1843) Thomas De Quincey urges the British government to "distinctly invite" white settlers: "To the botanist, the mineralogist, the naturalist, the sportsman, Ceylon offers almost a virgin Eldorado" (280). De Quincey's invitation is prompted by the 1815 British conquest of the Kandyan kingdom, which destroyed the city of Kandy and razed the jungle barrier, thus laying the whole island open to British control.<sup>20</sup> He proclaims this victory evidence of providential design for British imperial rule of the globe, and pronounces Ceylon the most valuable of the British colonies, Miltonic inheritor of "ancient Taprobane,"<sup>21</sup> "the representative of Paradise" (253). However, he decries native impediments to efficient colonial development: "Great are the possessions of Ceylon; far greater her reversions" (249). Echoing Heber's depiction of the "vile" Sinhalese, De Quincey excoriates the Kandyans who

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<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Mark Twain's *More Tramps Abroad* (1897): "'What though the spicy breezes blow soft o'er Ceylon's isle'—an eloquent line, an incomparable line; it says little, but conveys whole libraries of sentiment, and Oriental charm and mystery, and tropic deliciousness" (232).

<sup>19</sup> Reginald Heber served as the Bishop of Calcutta (1822-26) and wrote an account of his voyages, *Tour Through Ceylon* (1825).

<sup>20</sup> De Quincey's article for *Blackwoods* was written at a time when the conquest of Kandy was widely publicized in Britain and invited much triumphant self-congratulation. The troubled Orientalism characteristic of De Quincey's prose is exaggerated in this polemical article, which deploys every last trope in the "paradisal" canon in a flourish of imperialist bombast.

<sup>21</sup> Reversing the Archangel Michael's revelation to Adam of the world's potential paradises in *Paradise Lost*, in Milton's *Paradise Regained* Satan tempts Christ with a vision of mighty Empire which includes Ceylon in its span from "India and the Golden Chersonese" to "utmost Indian isle Taprobane."



resisted British conquest by staging guerilla attacks, calling them “children of hell” (268). He imagines Ceylon as a fallen, feminized paradise, a “Pandora of islands” whose “hyper-tropical munificence” is marred by “idolatrous darkness” (253). Yet, even if British colonization enables Ceylon to fulfil her economic possibility, De Quincey fears colonial desire for the island will be punished by pestilence:

With the new hopes that will now blossom amidst the ancient beauties of this lovely island, Ceylon will but too deeply fulfil the functions of a paradise. Too subtly she will lay fascinations upon man; and it will need all the anguish of disease, and the stings of death, to unloose the ties which, in coming ages, must bind the hearts of her children to this Eden of the terraqueous globe.  
(254)

This anti-paradisaal turn from tropical treasure-house to tropical graveyard is characteristic of British representations of Ceylon’s tropics, reflecting the conflict between paradisaal expectations and empirical reality in the colony.<sup>22</sup>

In *Eastern Empire* (1847), Charles Wynne Payne similarly lauds the paradisaal abundance of a “land of a most salubrious climate, and one truly flowing with “milk and honey.”” However, he attacks the colonial administrators of Ceylon, accusing them of appropriating lands from the natives for their own profit, and neglecting to develop the colony’s resources (8). His proposed “colonial reform,” that the “thinly populated” garden of Ceylon should be farmed to feed the poor of Britain, particularly famine-stricken Ireland, is clearly intended to benefit the British rather than the Ceylonese:<sup>23</sup>

Thus is the sin of [the imperial government’s] neglect of the “garden of the East”—Ceylon—visited on its children of the far West; and England, mourning over this national calamity, must be conscious, that had Ceylon been fostered with the “milk of human kindness” she would have [been

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<sup>22</sup> See David Arnold’s “Illusory Riches” (2000) and “Deathscapes” (2004). In “Illusory Riches” Arnold gives particular emphasis to the German naturalist Ernst Haeckel’s representations of Ceylon’s tropics.

<sup>23</sup> It is ironic that Payne should call for more efficient colonization of Ceylon to relieve a famine caused by Anglo-Irish economic policies reducing Irish agriculture to a monoculture—the problems of internal colonization are to be solved by external colonization. Parallels between Ireland and Sri Lanka or Ireland and India were frequently drawn by colonizers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and early anti-colonial struggle shared a transnational legacy of cooperation.

enabled] to yield the sustenance which unhappy Ireland is almost vainly craving. (14)

Rather than restoring the land to the indigenous people, Payne suggests that it be transformed into farms and plantations for British settlers, and that the monopoly of the corrupt East India Company should be broken, allowing more British entrepreneurs to participate in the development of the country. He concludes with a disingenuous image of the “docile and simple...frank and generous...chaste” natives living in paradisaal harmony with their “friend,” the British settler.<sup>24</sup> His fantasy of paradisaal abundance is yoked firmly to a project of colonial reform whose true imperative is political economy, rather than justice.

Ceylon’s varied topography and climate rendered the country particularly seductive to British colonizers, ranging from the moist, tropical lowlands of the south where the European population was primarily concentrated in the urban cities of the coast, to the arid flatlands of the northern dry zone to the cool, hilly highlands of the interior. It was these coveted highlands that the British had wrested from the Kandyan Sinhalese, and from 1815 onwards, they were positively compared in travel writing to the climate of the Scottish highlands.<sup>25</sup> In the 1840s, a small group of British settlers led by Samuel Baker began the work of transforming the upper highlands into “New Scotland.”<sup>26</sup> However, they found the interior rainforests unsuitable for white settlement, full of lethal “miasmas” and “vegetable corruption” which gave rise to the deadly “Candian fever.” Changing tactics, the Scottish “tropical pioneers” declared

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<sup>24</sup> “Ceylon offers every inducement for emigration—would that this contested principle of political economy were settled in her favour. Then would civilization extend its benign influence over that sunny and genial land, the cheering voice of peace would be lifted on its hills, and the song of contentment would be heard in its vallies; and I...might dwell the “natives” friend...amongst them” (Payne 19).

<sup>25</sup> The conquest of the Kandyan kingdom in order to “liberate” the highlands bears an uncanny resemblance to the Scottish Highland Clearances (1770-1870). The Scottish and Kandyan highlands both presented an impenetrable interior, a source of cultural and linguistic resistance. The Gaelic Highlanders were subjected to ethnic cleansing for both political and economic purposes, in order to assimilate fully the Highland region into the British economy, and to appropriate the land for sheep and cattle grazing. The burning of the Kandyan jungles parallels the firing of the Scottish heather, and implies that England “tried out” administrative, agricultural and economic strategies in Ireland and Scotland which it later exported to the colonies.

<sup>26</sup> In books such as *Eight Years’ Wandering in Ceylon* (1855) and *The Rifle and the Hound in Ceylon* (1853), Samuel Baker imagines recreating the lifestyle of the Scottish landed gentry in the hills of Ceylon. Baker is credited with the genesis of the Anglo-Ceylonese shooting and hunting memoir.



the highlands divinely appointed for agriculture, but attempts to import British cattle farming were thwarted by the outbreak of rinderpest and they failed to replicate the sheep and cattle grazing economy of the Highlands. In order to render this “wasted land” profitable, the colonial administration began an intensive project of ecological change, systematically burning off the highland forest mantle to make room for cash crops, without realizing they were ruining the fertile topsoil.

Unsatisfied with gem-stone mining and the cinnamon plantations developed by the Dutch, they decided to reproduce the lucrative monocultures of the West Indies and implemented the most extensive conversion of rainforest into tropical plantation agriculture anywhere in the British Empire (Webb 2). Building a network of roads into the interior, they precipitated a massive land grab from the peasants. The Crown Land Encroachment Ordinance of 1840 seized nearly 90% of cultivable land, rendering it unavailable for food-production (Yapa 101). The new availability of land coincided with the dwindling of profits in the West Indies after the abolition of slavery, and Ceylon became the new gold-land, drawing speculators in a rush for land similar to the U.S. gold-rush (Kiernan 79). Over 90,000 acres of hill country were converted into coffee plantations, and colonial officials, magistrates and chaplains neglected their responsibilities in hopes of becoming instantly wealthy by taking up shares of lands granted to planters (Kiernan 79). However, the booming export trade was decimated by the sudden spread of coffee fungus in 1869, until young planter James Taylor successfully experimented with tea.<sup>27</sup> The highlands were then converted into massive tea plantations staffed by indentured Tamil labourers imported from India, while the southwestern lowlands were sold to entrepreneurs for the development of coconut and rubber, further depriving the Ceylonese peasants of land for subsistence agriculture. Colombo was transformed into an economic command centre and Kandy into the locus of production for the imperial market (Perera 186).

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<sup>27</sup> See James L. A. Webb's *Tropical Pioneers* for the history of British intervention in the ecology of Sri Lanka. Ironically, the rinderpest was transmitted from India and South Africa. British horticulture and agriculture was marked by a misunderstanding and lack of respect for local flora and fauna similar to that which I described as resulting from the German romanticization of the highlands of *Ostafrika*. However, the Royal Botanical Gardens at Peradeniya carried out agricultural research which greatly benefited the later plantations, enlisting economic botany in the service of empire (Yapa 101).

The inauguration of a full-fledged plantation economy simultaneously modernized and underdeveloped Ceylon, creating an economic infrastructure designed to serve the influential new class of plantation owners, and rendering the country dependent on a few private commodities.

With this large-scale exploitation carried out, protests against colonial inefficiency began to diminish, and the language of paradise moved away from the politics of colonial reform and into the realm of aesthetics. Only once the historic and cultural heritage of the “Other” no longer presented a threat to British economic dominance could writers begin to show an interest in the Ceylonese milieu (Bailey-Goldschmidt 148). Having successfully conquered the long-resistant Kandyan kingdom, the British began to romanticize the ancient Sinhalese cities, temples, and magnificently intricate irrigation systems which they discovered in the jungles. A cult of the picturesque emerged in colonial travel narratives which represented the mountain highlands and ruined cities of Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa and Srigaya according to a Romantic aesthetic adopted from the Lake Country (Gooneratne 105).<sup>28</sup> This rhetorical strategy enabled travel writers and colonial Anglo-Ceylonese to engage simultaneously in textual appropriation of and detachment from the Other, flattening colonial realities into the “smooth façade of the picturesque” (Ghose 11). Ceylon’s rich religious and cultural history, as embodied by the artistic and architectural achievements of the ancient cities, temples, and irrigation systems, presented a challenge to Western authority and knowledge. The picturesque, however, enabled writers to convert centuries of Lankan civilization into mere landscape, a static image of attractive ruins that posed no challenge to the myth of British supremacy. Buddhist values which offered a possible resistance to Western civilization could be literally sublimated into a “landscape of the sublime,” where the elements of peace and serenity derived from Nature, not from indigenous philosophy or religion, and where paradisaal myths about

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<sup>28</sup> Yasmine Gooneratne argues that this cult developed as a result of the influence of 18<sup>th</sup>-century Scottish rhetoricians on the Scottish tropical pioneers, and cites an exemplary treatise, *The Beautiful, the Picturesque, the Sublime* (1837) by John Gibson MacVicar, the Presbyterian Chaplain of Colombo, which anoints the Ceylon “the Province of the Picturesque” (“Two” 355). Travel writers frequently compared the architecture and climate of the hill station Nurawa Eliya, “City of Light,” to the Lake District, heralding it as the “Buxton” of Ceylon.



Sri Pada could be positioned as yet another incidence of the “picturesque” nature of Ceylon, rather than a challenge to Western myths of origin.

If interior East Africa was seen as one of the last “virgin” spaces by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the final “gold-land” of empire, Ceylon’s attraction after the British conquest of the interior was as an El Dorado for the planter, the naturalist, and the first “package” tourists. However, this was an accessible, rather than ever-receding El Dorado, a bounded island which was less threatening and more easily traversed than the African interior, though it still possessed nearly “virgin” tracts of “primeval” rainforest. Although some later Anglophone writers like D.H. Lawrence would see emptiness in the Buddhist culture, Ceylon was rarely represented as a void or blank space. Rhetoric relied on the Orientalist notion of a marvellous opulence and excess, reassuringly contained by the colonial influence; indeed, multiple writers commented that Ceylon was more perfectly “Oriental” than the other countries which they visited on their Grand Tour of empire.<sup>29</sup> Rather than striving for originality, most travellers sought to establish the authority of their narratives by reproducing the structure and categories of previous travel writing, rehearsing a series of generic Orientalist tropes and set-pieces following the route of their fixed tourist itineraries.<sup>30</sup>

They begin by describing the sea journey to Ceylon, deriding Suez, borderline of the Orient, as “tempered” in comparison to the “veritable” paradise of Ceylon. Arriving on the island, description moves to the two main cities—Colombo, imperial centre of power, named by the Portuguese after Columbus—and Kandy, the former Sinhalese capital. Whereas grandiose colonial adaptations of space in Colombo, such as the

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<sup>29</sup> Mark Twain’s *More Tramps Abroad* (1897) provides a typical example: “Cairo was a tempered Orient—an Orient with an indefinite something wanting. That feeling was not present in Ceylon. Ceylon was Oriental in the last measure of completeness—utterly Oriental; also utterly tropical” (233). Twain’s last travelogue was seen by critics as a cynical, money-making project, lacking the wit of *Innocence Abroad*. One of the first package tourists following the steamship “grand tour,” Twain satirized the cliché-packed genre of the Eastern travelogue, yet confirmed prejudices of the Orient as populated by lazy, dirty, inferior natives (Kabbani 139). Twain confessed to William D. Howells, “I wrote my last travel-book in hell; But I let on, the best I could, that it was an excursion through heaven” (cited in LeMaster and Wilson 296).

<sup>30</sup> This is perhaps even more true in women’s travel writing about Ceylon, which strives to appropriate patriarchal power; see Indira Ghose’s *Women Travellers in Colonial India* (1998); Sara Mills’ *Discourses of Difference* (1991).

Botanical Gardens, the Galle Face promenade, and the grand mansions of the Cinnamon Gardens, are praised, Kandy's architecture is usually held to be inferior, reflecting the degree to which the British deliberately reconfigured the space of the city to diminish its former significance as the capital of the Sinhalese kingdom.<sup>31</sup> Thereafter the unique cultural attractions of the island are recounted: the Peak, the Perahera, a Kandyan festival in homage to the Buddha's Tooth, the Pearl divers, the Great Bo Tree, where Buddha allegedly received enlightenment, the fresco-maidens of Srigaya, the mighty temples and giant stone Buddhas, and the ruined cities of the ancient kings. The forced ebullience of these recursive accounts of wonders exposes their authors' need to reel off checklists of Orientalist clichés to satisfy commercial expectations. Ceylon's reputation as a "hunter's paradise" impelled male travellers to boast of their shooting expeditions in search of elephant or leopard, giving rise to a spin-off genre of hunting and shooting memoirs, such as Samuel Baker's *The Rifle and the Hound in Ceylon* (1853).

Writers also performed a "rehearsal" of Ceylonese culture in terms of European taboos against sexuality (Bailey-Goldschmidt and Kalfatovic 147). From Fitch onwards, travel writing dwells on the effeminate dress of the male Sinhalese, with their sarongs and long hair held in place by combs, and portrays them as indolent lotus-eaters. Women travellers give voyeuristic descriptions of the "secret" harems of Arab "Moors," but these are secondary to sensational accounts of Sinhalese polyandry. The persistent discussion of the sexual mores and "graceful," "sensual" bodies of the Sinhalese reveals the extent to which Ceylon operated as a "Tahiti of the East" in the Western imagination. Sinhalese polyandry recalled the sexually-free "paradises" of the islands of the South Pacific, long after they had been ravaged by the venereal diseases spread by sailors. The attractive bodies and unusual sexual practices of the natives seemed to incarnate Ceylon's exoticism. Polyandry became a locus of colonial desire in Anglophone writing, confirming the emasculation of Sinhalese men and fulfilling fantasies of promiscuous native women. It was also an

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<sup>31</sup> See Nihal Perera's *Society and Space* (1998) for a history of how the British changed the architecture of Kandy and Colombo in order to establish Colombo as the imperial capital.



object of colonial intervention and repression. British civil servants destroyed the system of kinship ties in order to introduce more effective taxation, and missionaries targeted polyandry as the most decadent of native customs.

Unlike Tahiti, Ceylon possessed a Buddhist religious exotic, which made it particularly seductive to Americans prepared by transcendentalism and theosophy to admire the “spirituality of Eastern culture.” Late 19<sup>th</sup>-century writers replaced the earlier missionary image of a paradise spoiled by idolatry with the “paradise of dharma.” Rather than “vile heathen,” the Sinhalese are imagined as sinless inhabitants of Eden. Thus, Archibald Constable praises the “chaste nudity,” “womanliness” and lack of “violent western passions” in the “simple affections” of the Sinhalese:

I could see something of the serene Buddha of the temples in every Sinhalese face [...] I shall always think of Ceylon as an Eden, and of the Sinhalese as happy children who have not yet eaten of that tree which Pessimism calls Consciousness. (cited in Goonetilleke 193)

The tendency to romanticize Ceylon as a Buddhist paradise is more pronounced in American travel writing than in British writing which favoured the Scottish-inflected rhetoric of the picturesque, reflecting a difference in power, since Buddhism represented a system of knowledge which challenged colonial authority.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, the Buddhist revival of the 1880s was the forerunner of nationalism, attacking Christianity and missionary education, and many Anglo-American theosophists who fervently embraced Buddhist values, such as Colonel Alcott and Annie Besant, were also active in movements for Indian independence.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Nonetheless, American travel writing anticipated the rise of American imperialism and consolidated American identity in contrast to the “Other India” of Ceylon: “The last on the scene...were the visitors from the New World, fresh and eager to take all Asia in their stride, after carving out a whole new society in the territories of the American India” (Goonetilleke xv).

<sup>33</sup> Yet while the anti-materialism of Buddhist values presented a challenge, the emphasis on passivity in traditional forms of the religion was exploited by the British and used to uphold colonial hierarchies of priests and headmen as part of the “divide and rule” policy: “Far better than anything else [this world-fleeing and thus thoroughly spiritual instruction] kept the people long-suffering, for the benefit of a very long-lived, despotic, slave-owning society” (Bloch “Principle” 1137).

However, traces of Heber's "vile man" persisted even in more favourably disposed accounts of the Buddhist exotic. Constable tellingly differentiates the "dark-visaged," "melancholy" Tamils from the "happy" Sinhalese (193). Anglophone writing distinguished between Tamils and Sinhalese according to skin colour, religion, language, race and culture. The Sinhalese were seen as the fairer race, with a musical language descended from Sanskrit, a religion superior to that of the pantheistic "vile Hindu," and a culture less inhibited by the caste system. If the Sinhalese were "noble savages," the Tamils were simply savage. Travel writers could therefore praise the Sinhalese while still maintaining the spectre of the black Other. The reduction of Ceylonese identity into two monolithic, homogenizing categories was inspired by German Orientalist scholarship which promulgated philological distinctions between the noble Aryan and the inferior Dravidian and sought Indo-Aryan antecedents for Western culture (Benes 121). Colonial officials in Ceylon categorized the Ceylonese according to whether they spoke Sinhalese or Tamil, labelling the Sinhalese-speakers the descendents of the Indo-Aryan northern races and rightful occupants of the island, as opposed to the Tamil-speaking "invaders" from the Dravidian south. The colonial administration imported "hardier" Tamil labour from India to work the tea plantations, and divided the island into a Tamil north and a Sinhalese south, failing to distinguish between the minority of Tamil inhabitants of ancient date and the second, distinct class of plantation workers. Colonial racial science did not recognize that waves of migration had prevented the formation of discrete Sinhalese and Tamil identities and that many of the people spoke one language but practiced the opposite religion, or practiced multiple religions. It promoted the false conception of Lanka as an impermeable island with an "authentic" history of "pure" Sinhalese civilization threatened by Tamil outsiders intent on usurping the rightful owners of the island. The British designated a third category of natives, the aboriginal Veddas, whom they saw as sub-human animals, again failing to understand that centuries of intermingling meant that many Sinhalese were partly Vedda.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> See Darini Rajasingham-Senanayake's "Identity on the Borderline" (2002) and Neluka Silva's *Hybrid Island* (2002) for further discussion of colonial categories of race and identity in Ceylon and their ramifications for postcolonial Sri Lanka.



The naturalization of invented categories of race occurred most prominently in the massive, ethnographical histories of Ceylon which appeared in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>35</sup> Like the travel narratives which repeated generic tropes and structures, these histories imitated earlier historical accounts of Ceylon, including Knox's *An Historical Relation* and Dutch scholar Francois Valentijn's *Description of Ceylon* (1724). These immense books sought to organize the whole of Ceylonese history and culture according to the pseudo-scientific categories of Western knowledge and scholarship, performing a "panoptical encyclopaedic appropriation of indigenous customs, histories, relics and statistics" (Ghose 15). Each history carried a subtitle indicating its comprehensive scope, as in the case of Sir Emerson Tennent's "An Account of the Island Physical, Historical, and Topographical with Notices of Its Natural History, Antiquities and Productions." Tennent and the other writers exhaustively detailed the myths associated with the island. While the picturesque mode of travel writing reduced Buddhism to a landscape of ruins, the ethnographers portrayed Ceylon as a paradise of ancient Buddhist learning for the Orientalist scholar sufficiently sensitive to excavate the ruins. Their project was archaeological in nature—uncovering lost Pali texts and artefacts, classifying them, and presenting them in re-organized, translated form for the consumption of Western scholars.<sup>36</sup> The scholars distinguished between the "enlightened" form of Buddhism, as a philosophy practiced by some educated monks, and the "vulgar" popular form practiced by villagers. Driven by the imperative of colonial rhetoric which needed to assert its authority and superiority, they downplayed the portrayal of Ceylon as "spiritually rich," and enumerated its economic resources instead. They devalued myths of Eden by portraying the religions of the island as impoverished: Hinduism as perverse, and Buddhism as noble in philosophy, but debased in practice.

William Knighton's 2-volume *Forest-Life in Ceylon* (1854) springs from this genre. Although it has been singled out by Gooneratne as the first Sri Lankan "novel of

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<sup>35</sup> See Robert Percival's *An Account of the Island of Ceylon* (1803), James Emerson Tennent's magisterial *Ceylon: An Account* (1850), and James Cordiner's *A Description of Ceylon* (1887).

<sup>36</sup> William Geiger's famous translation of the *Mahavamsa* (1912) was commissioned by the colonial government. Ironically, it was through the English version of Geiger's translation that many 20<sup>th</sup>-century Sinhalese would first read the chronicle.

permanent value" to be written in English (108), *Forest-Life* is less a novel than a hybrid of ethnographic historiography, set-pieces from hunting and shooting memoirs, and fictionalized "interviews" with native religious leaders, a "Parsee and a Kandian chief." The second volume opens with a turgid account of the myths and traditions of Buddhism, before narrating the "Subjugation of Kandy" through the perspective of Marandan, the fictional heir to the last Kandyan chief. This "history" ostensibly portrays the trauma of the conquest through Sinhalese eyes and explores the underground resistance to British colonization by networks of Buddhist monks and former Sinhalese rulers. However, Marandan's decision to reject the resistance movement, convert to Christianity, and become an Anglicized, "modern" gentleman underwrites the notion of the British conquest as a modernizing, beneficial force bringing not subjugation but civilization to the conquered peoples.<sup>37</sup> It is ironic that Gooneratne commends Knighton's "original" use of "the ideals and traditions of Buddhism to formulate the moral standards of a novel and to develop its characters," since the possibilities of an alternative system of values are negated by Knighton's declared intention to show "how strangely...the old life of the East, with its antiquated habits and forms of thought" stands in opposition to "the new life of the progressive West" (vii).<sup>38</sup> Knighton imagines the conflict "between Eastern and Western races...a collision as much of souls as of bodies" (vii) as more traumatic for the native Marandan than for the European, since the irruption of capitalist modernity produces an angst which can only be relieved through "conversion" to more progressive values. The native Buddhist voice is invoked only to reaffirm the

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<sup>37</sup> This is particularly evident in the debates between a Christian planter and the Buddhist Marandan, in which the latter is persuaded "to investigate the system [of Christianity] with a full and entire desire to arrive at the truth" (432). The notional aristocracy which attaches to Marandan, last heir of Kandy, is also significant. Knighton renders his "native" character more palatable to his readership by making him closer in social status to the British colonial society of which he allegedly aspires to become a part, as a figure being groomed to rule as a comprador class.

<sup>38</sup> Gooneratne is one of the few Sri Lankan critics to write in English and is an expatriate in Australia, having left after the 1980s. Her critical work, as distinct from her poetry, is primarily occupied with constructing a genealogy of Sri Lankan writing in English—a national literature in English—and is characterized by a problematic lack of discursive analysis of the texts produced by colonial writers, placing colonial writing by Anglo-Ceylonese and postcolonial writing on a continuous spectrum. She rarely addresses the politics of texts, but more often examines the aesthetics of Sri Lankan writing in the context of Romanticism.



superiority of the European and to defang the prospect of resistance rooted in Buddhist revivalism.

Yet, the formal peculiarities of Knighton's work, its oscillation between genres and points of view—the first person, the ethnographic, the dialogic, the historical, the polemic—suggest the degree to which his attempt to represent the native voice profoundly disturbs the conventions of the novel, constantly threatening to overwhelm the authority of the narrator. His aim is paradoxical: he wishes to give the illusion of dialogue, yet while reaffirming the supremacy of Western values and forestalling the possibility of another revolt like the Matale Rebellion of 1848, when Sinhalese agitated against the appropriation of their land, only to be brutally repressed by the colonial government. Knighton's switches to more authoritative modes—ethnography, Socratic debate—represent his formal attempts to contain the eruption of the voice of the Other. However, the "collision" between races and values ends by being profoundly unsettling, particularly when the violence of conquest is evoked from the Other's perspective.

Gooneratne ascribes a "sensitivity" to Knighton's treatment of local landscapes which derives from "an imagination original and strong enough to break away from accepted conventions" (109). While Knighton deromanticizes tropes of Ceylon as "island of dharma" from preceding travel memoirs in order to represent the island in realist, historical terms which better reflect the empirical experience of the colony, he does not so much break away from, as invert them. Instead of finding the natives picturesque, effeminate, child-like or innocent, the narrator sees them as sub-human, "gibbering, long-armed, brown, naked animals." He describes pestilential, rather than paradisaic Nature, cataloguing flying leeches, charging elephants, and infernal mosquitoes. Even Adam's Peak, the "great object of reverence," is derided as "emphatically a humbug" (260), although an Edenic prospect does become possible when the narrator looks down from the peak at dawn to see "all was nature, and nature only, without being interfered with or marred by man" (264). As in Humboldt's naturalistic passages surveying American landscape, Ceylon can only

become paradisaical when Knighton's narrator manages to empty its interior of the disturbing, "repulsive" presence of the indigenous peoples and cultures he struggles to hold in subjugation.

## **Paradise in Need of Reform: Critiques of Colonial Praxis**

The discursive use of the paradise motif in representations of Ceylon is far from homogenous, fluctuating in response to the writer's political position, as we have seen in the case of William Knighton, who is particularly weighed down by the "white man's burden" and feels the need to strip Ceylon of its paradisaical reputation in order to justify imperial authority. Harriet Martineau's novella-length "Cinnamon and Pearls" (1833) is an example of a counter-use of the paradise motif to mount a passionate critique of imperialism in Ceylon. As an anti-slavery campaigner and proto-sociologist, Martineau observed working conditions across Britain and the empire, writing analyses of the connections between chattel slavery in the colonies and wage slavery and class oppression at home.<sup>39</sup> The development of the plantation system in isolated, self-contained Ceylon was as radical an innovation in Asia as industrial capitalism in Europe, but it was only achieved through compulsion and importation of a captive workforce. Sinhalese peasants with no land of their own refused to work on plantations and struggled to grow enough food to eat and pay colonial taxes, while Tamil coolies were firmly repressed by the government and police (Kiernan 80). After her observation of Ceylonese pearl-fishers, plantation-labourers, and subsistence chena-farmers, Martineau came to see Ceylon as a paradise of "natural wealth" which had been despoiled by British imperial rapacity, to the disaster of the natives "of the land as well as of the sea," whose communal lifestyle had been destroyed and who had been reduced to slaves in all but name.

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<sup>39</sup> In *Illustrations of Political Economy* (1832-34) Martineau records her observations and urges governmental action to abolish chattel slavery, wage slavery, and class oppression. While Martineau greatly influenced the transatlantic abolition movement, her greater utopian hopes for an equal society would not be realized.



“Cinnamon and Pearls” adopts Martineau’s usual method of combining a “novelistic style of emotionalized realism with the abstract language of economic theory” (Wood “Slavery” 266) and as such has certain flaws: the characters are “flat,” if unsentimentalized, the fictional veneer frequently gives way to polemic, and the concluding economic solution is paternalistic.<sup>40</sup> However, the presence of articulate indigenous voices asking why “this England” has a right to appropriate their resources and their land offers an unsettling counterpoint to homogenizing colonial discourse. Through the story of Rayo and Marana, a pearl-fisher and his betrothed whose attempts at self-sufficiency are repeatedly thwarted, Martineau shows how the colonial administration and merchants have brought the inhabitants “as near to the brink of starvation as they pleased in their methods of employing their toil” (20). As an Orientalist trope unique to Ceylon, the figure of the pearl-diver is frequently romanticized in travel accounts.<sup>41</sup> However, in Keats’ “Isabella” (1818), the pearl-diver’s suffering becomes the locus for critique of Isabella’s capitalist brothers, whose speculation in colonial ventures propagates exploitation and slavery:

For them the Ceylon diver held his breath,  
 And went all naked to the hungry shark;  
 For them his ears gushed blood<sup>42</sup>

Martineau echoes Keats’ portrayal of the pearl-divers as oppressed, risking their lives on each lung-bursting plunge into the depths, yet receiving only a meagre wage. Her protagonist Rayo despairs of surviving a lifetime as a pearl-fisher: “This is not the sort of eternity he had ever thought of desiring; [not even] purgatory is worse” (31), and steals a pearl in the attempt to end his servitude, only to be caught by colonial

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<sup>40</sup> Martineau argues that wage-slavery in Ceylon is the direct product of domestic economic policy in England and demands the abolition of the protected trade monopolies propping up the inefficient systems of colonial labour. However, she also advocates the continued use of the colony for settlement by “merciful” English settlers who will educate the natives and lead them into the new promised land of economic opportunity.

<sup>41</sup> It even inspired Bizet’s opera, *The Pearl Fishers* (1863), first performed in London in 1887.

<sup>42</sup> Ceylon was “very much a public issue in 1818, a prime example of the East India Company’s widespread corruption and repressive rule” (Baum 117-18). In the Uva Rebellion of 1817-1818, the Kandyan aristocracy mobilized their peasants in revolt against the annexation of their kingdom, but were brutally suppressed. “‘Isabella’ is unusually explicit, even exceptional, for a Keats poem in its criticism of colonial endeavor and all the fields of mercantile operation (Fulford and Kitson 1). Elsewhere in his work, Keats is “inconsistent and politically disengaged” in relation to colonialism, even “parad[ing] celebratory Eurocentric narratives” (Wood 241) as in his celebration of the Spanish conquest of the Americas in “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer.”

officials and fined.<sup>43</sup> He migrates south with Marana to try farming, but they are reduced to starvation by land-taxes, finding that “the wily and venomous agency of monopoly” has “turned their native paradise into a dreary wilderness” (103).

Martineau reproduces familiar scenic marvels in Ceylon—the Pearl Divers, the Cinnamon Gardens—but subverts these by placing them in proximity to Rayo and Marana’s struggle to survive under a colonial administration which is far from marvellous: “The English come for our pearls once a year, and then they see us gay, and observe and observe that our shore is spread with wealth. They do not know how little of this wealth is ours, or suspect what our hunger and nakedness are” (109). Anglo-Ceylonese satisfaction in the colonial reordering of space—“the groves and gardens were a paradise to the eye of the Europeans”—is brilliantly juxtaposed with the “dreary wilderness” of the natives’ deprivation (41). The paradise motif is therefore inverted to offer a powerful critique of the unequal relations created by imperialist monopoly and the depravity of creating artificial paradises of privilege by robbing and enslaving the people of the island. For Martineau, the crown colony is not a “garden of the East” to be “milked” for the benefit of speculators and entrepreneurs; but rather a “land of promise” which can only fulfill its potential when the indigenous peoples compete and work in a free market.

While Martineau’s fictionalized polemic represents the most radical deployment of the inverted paradise motif, it appears frequently throughout literature advocating reform in Ceylon, whether that of economists urging a more efficient use of resources and better treatment of the natives in order to increase their productivity, or of educationalists and doctors arguing for the creation of “improving” institutions in the

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<sup>43</sup> Leonard Woolf gives a detailed account of the administration of the pearl fisheries. During the annual season, four colonial officials presided over as many as 50,000 pearl divers, who fetched pearl oysters from the seabed. The government officials took two-thirds of every share and left the divers the rest. The unopened oysters were packed into squares and auctioned in lots by the government to the highest bidders. The pearls were extracted by leaving the oysters to rot, resulting in a hellish scene: “As The Fishery went on, the whole camp became full of thousands of putrid and putrescent oysters, a horrible smell hung over it and us night and day and myriads of flies swarmed over everything” (Woolf “Growing” 90). Another observer, Captain Frederick Marryat remarks of the unfairness of the distribution: “The poor divers’ lottery is shark or no shark; the purchasers’ pearls or no pearls” (6).



colony.<sup>44</sup> In these accounts, Ceylon is a paradise spoilt by ignorance or disease, but one which can be redeemed through Western philanthropy. In medical writing, the trope of infested Eden is frequently invoked to represent the ravages of malaria and parasites. In "Snakes in Eden" (1915), Victor Heiser, a doctor commissioned by the Rockefeller Foundation, suggests medical intervention will rid the final imperfections from the Eden which the British have constructed through ecological and economic:<sup>45</sup>

When the British in 1795 added Ceylon to their Empire, they became overlords of a country with a storied past but no apparent future...The island, which had known the yoke of Hindustan, Portugal, and the Netherlands, retained only the vestiges of its ancient riches—few divers descended to the famous pearl fisheries, the gold mines were abandoned, the people had grown weary...the jungle had crowded into the groves of cinnamon and cardamom...But, once again...the Fragrant Isle had bloomed...Pungent tea shrubs flourish luxuriantly on every mountain side, and latex flows from the rubber trees...Because of its economic prosperity, Ceylon was looked upon in the East as a prize colony, although many serpents flourished in this Garden of Eden; the hookworm infestation was heavy and widespread. (cited in Goonetilleke 274)

Heiser's affirmation of British imperialism is significant, since while Ceylon may be represented as a lost or fallen paradise in order to highlight the need for reform, the inverted motif is rarely used in 19<sup>th</sup> or early 20<sup>th</sup>-century texts to advocate British removal from the island.<sup>46</sup> Rather, the changes promoted by reforms often served to

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<sup>44</sup> See, for example, John Davy's *An Account of the Interior of Ceylon* (1821). British doctor Davy accompanied Governor Robert Brownrigg on his 1816-20 tour of the recently conquered central provinces, and keenly envisions the improvements British medicine will bring to the interior.

<sup>45</sup> Heiser's intention to "open the 'golden window of the East' to the gospel of health" (cited in Goonetilleke 272) is characteristic of America's growing participation in the civilizing mission.

<sup>46</sup> Anton Chekhov offers another use of the inverted paradise motif to advocate reform while upholding the notion of British empire. Chekhov visited Ceylon in 1890 at the end of an Eastern tour which began with his visit to Sakhalin Island. In *A Journey To Sakhalin* (1894), he describes how rather than a self-sustaining agricultural utopia, he found an overpopulated, brutally-administered penal colony of jails, hovels, and bureaucrats, whose starving residents resorted to crime to survive. After the "perfect hell" of Sakhalin, Ceylon seems like an "earthly Paradise" to him ("Letters" 48). He decries the "crying poverty" of Russia's "Eastern sea-coast and Pacific dreams" (48) in contrast to British Ceylon: "I...was moved to indignation at hearing my Russian fellow-travellers abuse the English for exploiting the natives. I thought: Yes, the English exploit the Chinese, the Sepoys, the Hindoos, but they do give them roads, aqueducts, museums, Christianity, and what do you give them?" (48).

deepen colonial influence, as in the case of the schools set up to teach Tamils English and form an administrative underclass of civil servants.

In Caroline Corner's novel, *The Paradise of Adam* (1908), the inverted motif is developed in order to negotiate a space for female agency within the imperial and patriarchal structures governing Anglo-Ceylonese society. Corner's novel is a thinly disguised autobiography, which like Knighton's *Forest-Life* seems awkwardly poised between the conventions of the novel and the hunting and shooting memoir. The wife of a clerk in the Ceylon Colonial Secretary's Office, Corner was unhappily married and discontent in colonial society, which she perceived as parochial, anti-intellectual, and repressive. Her novel criticizes this society through the eyes of its freshly-arrived protagonist, Cynthia, an independent young woman who refuses to conform to colonial mores. Cynthia dreams that she is visited by a Bird of Paradise, who narrates the story of Ceylon's mythic origins: "Adam, the father of all, found something wanting when driven out of Eden. He parted from Eve...prior to his banishment to Ceylon, the Paradise of Adam" (4). Cynthia exclaims, "The Paradise of Adam!...What of Eve?" (5), a question which becomes the central theme of the novel, inspiring Cynthia to establish her place as a white European female—or "imperial Eve"—in Ceylon.

Corner adapts the set-pieces of the travel narrative to legitimate Cynthia as an explorer and adventurer in pursuit of knowledge. Cynthia repeatedly leaves the domestic space and penetrates public institutions—the town hall, the Court, the plantation fields—which represent imperial, patriarchal authority, and defies "conventionality" in search of exotic experience, as when she insists on riding unaccompanied beyond the accepted limits of the Galle Face promenade, or demands to see a "genuine" *yakkadura* (devil dance/exorcism) rather than a staged version (21). Cynthia acquires agency through a gender-inflected ethnography, aimed at establishing the authority of the female rather than imperial male voice. The woman explorer is represented as possessing superior insight into the worth of alternative cultural traditions: "As gems are discovered buried amongst mud, so jewels of



spiritual worth may be found amid the filth and ignorance of so-called 'heathen' Oriental village life" (20). Through her explorations of village-life and her consultation of a *Mudaliyar* (headman), she becomes an expert in Buddhist myths and folk-tales, a Scheherazade who narrates the landscape rather than subjugating it. Departing from the conventions of the hunting and shooting memoir, she refuses to exercise dominion over nature by shooting animals. Instead, Corner constructs Cynthia as an Eve in harmony with Nature, exercising a benign dominion over its creatures, from elephants to aboriginal Veddas, whom she names, tames, and summons to her bidding. Unlike Adam, hers is the authority of sympathy, but authority all the same.

While Corner carves out space in the imperial male adventurer genre for the Victorian woman, she remains complicit with the discourses of imperialism implicit in the genre. Cynthia is reported to be "growing very sceptical in the East," yet Ceylon remains for her a "golden, glorious land...an Eden!" Although Cynthia rebukes the arrogance of colonial officials whom she calls "little tin gods," and deconstructs the illusion of Ceylon as El Dorado by portraying starving coffee-planters whose crops have failed, she never becomes so sceptical as to question her right to claim Eve's authority. Corner imagines Ceylon as a potential utopia of white European female agency and philanthropy: "The Orient is a world of dreams, Ceylon a Paradise, a Paradise not of Adam only, a Paradise of Eve it might be, were the law respecting woman altered" (323). It is the unequal position of white European women which Corner wishes to correct, not that of indigenous men and women. Corner's "paradise of Eve" represents the impact of new discourses emerging at the end of the Victorian era, those revolving around women's legal rights and suffrage. In the final section of this chapter, I will explore the impact of modernity and imperial decline on European representations of Ceylon in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## Jungle Tides and Fountains of Tears: Endangered Ceylon

"I proceeded by sea to Seyllan, a glorious mountain opposite to Paradise. And from Seyllan to Paradise, according to what the natives say after the tradition of their fathers, is a distance of forty miles; so that, 'tis said, the sound of the waters falling from the fountains of Paradise is heard there."

- *The Travels of Giovanni de Marignolli* (1350)

In my second chapter, I described Mexico's particular attraction for late modernist writers as an "infernal paradise" mirroring the national and imperial decline of Britain. Ceylon was also a major literary destination in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, a star in the constellation of destinations that comprised the "Grand Tour." However, its appeal was Edenic rather than infernal beauty, its reputation as an unspoiled island paradise, not yet marred by the violence of decolonization and ethnic conflict. The list of writers to visit Ceylon in search of a lingering Oriental exotic includes George Bernard Shaw,<sup>47</sup> Henri Michaux, Nikos Kazantzakis,<sup>48</sup> Thomas Merton,<sup>49</sup> and Shiva Naipaul.<sup>50</sup> Some writers, like D.H. Lawrence, Leonard Woolf, Pablo Neruda,<sup>51</sup> Paul

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<sup>47</sup> Shaw's play *On the Rocks* (1933) focuses on the character of a Sinhalese politician, Sir Jafna Pandranath, who visits Westminster to protest imperial exploitation and advocate independence.

<sup>48</sup> See Kazantzakis' description of his visit to Colombo in *Travels in China and Japan* (1964) (26-8).

<sup>49</sup> Thomas Merton, the American Trappist, visited Sri Lanka in 1968. His *Asian Journal* laudably attempts to overcome Western hubris, yet still essentializes Anuradhapura: "This is Asia in its purity, not covered over with garbage, Asian or European or American, and it is clear, pure, complete" (236).

<sup>50</sup> Naipaul's last book, *An Unfinished Journey* (1981), opens in Sri Lanka on the eve of the '81 riots. Naipaul attacks tourist myths of island-paradise: Colombo is "festive under smoky skies;" the island is "in a condition approaching civil war," a description of the city at dawn, "uninviting and unkempt," its gutters "littered with piles of refuse" is ironically juxtaposed with the hotel's card, which reads, "Welcome...to Sri Lanka, Pearl of the Indian Ocean" (73). Naipaul deconstructs the chauvinist rhetoric of Buddhist-nationalism which portrays Sri Lanka as a paradise spoiled by invading Dravidians by retelling the story of Vijaya to show that the Sinhalese were themselves invaders who conquered, exploited, and intermingled with indigenous peoples, rather than a "pure" race. Vijaya first beds, then rejects Kuveni, the daughter of an aboriginal chieftain, "Lanka's Caliban." Naipaul's political critique is proleptic, but entrenched in a nihilistic vision of the island as a "void disguised by wealth and vulgar consumerism...sloganeering and political extremism" (128).

<sup>51</sup> During the 1930s, Pablo Neruda was posted to Colombo as Chilean ambassador. Several poems in *Residencia en la Tierra*, "Monsoon in May," and "Burial in the East," are set in Ceylon. In his *Memoirs* (1974), he criticizes the "impenetrable" colonial "crust" who "entrench themselves in their neighbourhoods and their clubs." The absence of "visible symptoms of revolution" lends an "oppressive calm"; opium is not "the paradise of exotic," but rather "an escape for the exploited...the colonized" (88). He names Leonard Woolf's *Village in the Jungle* an exception to "narrow colonialism," "one of the best books ever published about the Orient...a masterpiece true to both life and literature" (93).



Bowles,<sup>52</sup> and Arthur C. Clarke, elected to live and write in Ceylon for longer periods of time. The use of the paradise motif by these writers is increasingly bound up with the pressures of declining European empire, giving rise to both imperial nostalgia and anti-colonialism. Anglo-Ceylonese writing was also marked by an emergent eco-consciousness which mourned the disappearance of Ceylon's jungles, wildlife and aboriginal peoples as a result of the modernizing forces of imperialism. Ceylon could be, according to the sensibility of the writer, either the nostalgic image of the lost colonial paradise, or a paradise despoiled by colonialism and modernity.

D.H. Lawrence visited Ceylon en route to Australia as part of his "savage pilgrimage," but found the country "nauseating," unsettling, profoundly anti-paradisaal. In his letters, he denigrates the exotic qualities for which Ceylon is usually praised: its culture, tropical exuberance, and Buddhist spirituality, pouring out his disgust for the "sensuous spiritual voluptuousness" of the Sinhalese.<sup>53</sup> To Lawrence, Buddhism is "without new possibilities" for regeneration, a "vulgar temple of serenity built over an empty hole in space" ("Letters" 700). He cannot envision remaking the "Old World" of the East, as he can New Mexico, and therefore persists in seeing it as empty and threatening.<sup>54</sup> The one event which impresses him is the Perahera, in which elaborately-costumed elephants are paraded in honour of the sacred relic of

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<sup>52</sup> Paul Bowles resided in Ceylon in the 1950s, inspired to visit by Henri Michaux's *Un Barbare en Asie* (1932). He writes in *Without Stopping* (1972) that he expected to find "an intensification...of all the hermetic mystery of Morocco, plus...elephants, Buddhist temples, and tropical forests," (298) but was instead "exhilarated by the light, the climate, and the vegetation" (298) and impulsively purchased a small coastal island christened Taprobane. Several short stories based in Ceylon appear in *Collected Stories*: "In the Red Room" (1956) is a typical piece, in which Western tourists encounter a Sinhalese man who gives them a tour of a colonial house with a "cloying scent" like incense. Later they discover that he was a serial murderer and that the red room they mistook for a Buddhist holy space was a shrine to death: the paradisaal exotic sought by the travellers turns out to be a "Third World" horror.

<sup>53</sup> Lawrence is exuberantly racist: "The East doesn't get me at all. Its boneless suavity, and the thick, choky feel of tropical forests, and the metallic sense of palms and the horrid noises of the birthing creatures...and the scents that make me feel sick, the perpetual nauseous overtone of cocoanut and cocoanut fibre and oil, the sort of tropical sweetness which to me suggests an Untertang of blood, hot blood, and thin sweat...the nasty faces and yellow robes of the Buddhist monks, the little vulgar dens of the temples: all this makes up Ceylon to me, and all this I cannot bear" ("Letters" 699-700).

<sup>54</sup> Nonetheless, Lawrence's experience in Ceylon continued to "swamp over" into his Mexican writing, as in *The Plumed Serpent*, where Kate hears drumming: "At the same instant the sound that always made her heart stand still woke on the invisible air. It was the sound of drums, of tom-toms rapidly beaten. The same sound she had heard in the distance, in the tropical dusk of Ceylon, from the temple at sunset. [...] The sound that wakes dark, ancient echoes in the heart of every man, the thud of the primeval world" (333).

Buddha's tooth. Struck by the impotence of the Prince of Wales, who was attending the festival as part of his symbolic tour of empire, Lawrence wrote the poem "Elephant" in which he fantasizes taking power in the stead of the Prince, riding in dominion over all the surging life-forces. His nausea and anxiety seem to derive primarily from his fear that the "swarming billions" of the East will overwhelm the declining post-war British Empire:

I break my heart over England when I am out here. Those natives are *back* of us—in the living sense *lower* than we are. But they're going to swarm over us and suffocate us. We are, have been for five centuries, the growing tip. Now we are going to fall. ("Letters" 702)

For Lawrence, Ceylon is a lost paradise, an inferno where he "wander[s] like Virgil in the shades" among Anglo-Ceylonese clinging to dying empire (702). The "soft, moist, elephantine prehistoric" tide of Ceylon threatens to "swamp in over" the "known world" and drown the narrative of British history (702).

In Leonard Woolf's *The Village in the Jungle* (1913), the motif of a destructive jungle tide serves the opposite purpose, criticizing the impact of colonialism on Ceylonese culture, rather than imagining the demise of British sovereignty. In his autobiography, Woolf writes that his seven years in the Ceylon Civil Service exposed him to "the social and economic squalor in which thousands of Sinhalese and Tamil villagers lived" as a result of "the evils of imperialism" ("Journey" 153). His letters and diaries give a clear impression of his intellectual progression from an "unconscious imperialist" into an anti-imperialist. Shortly after his arrival, he describes the landscape as paradisaical but the society of the colonizers as "absolutely degraded": "The people—the English are hell, the Australians Sodom & Gomorrah. But outside—I just see that it's heaven" ("Letters" 68). The disjunction between natural beauty and colonial society is repeated in a letter to Lytton Strachey, which attaches the paradisaical topos of Cythera to the Jaffna archipelago:

O if only you had been in that boat, it would have indeed have been the depart pour Cythère; it's the only place to live in, the East, if you could only have the



right people in it with you. Can you see it all? The sun & the blue water, the boats with their great square sails...the melancholy islands we glided by (77)

However, even this muted romanticism is repudiated in a later letter, after Woolf has administered the stinking pearl fisheries and been forced to carry out executions: "I'm all for reality...I don't believe in L'Ile de Cythère" (134). Woolf increasingly comes to see the colonial administration in anti-paradisaal terms, as "a hell of lunatics" (113), and by 1908, he is bitter, disillusioned, kept sane only by his "mania" for work:

Sometimes I think I shall just bury myself in it & never come back again. If I did this & this were not a miserable little Crown Colony [...] & if I didn't die or marry a prostitute, why I suppose then I should become Colonial Secretary of some wonderful phantasmagorical British Utopia with a KCMG (137)

For Woolf, Ceylon is not Cythère, the island of love, but rather the island of prostitution and exploitation, where colonial officials satisfy their loneliness with local women and the "civilizing" claims of British imperialism can be savagely dismissed as fantasy.<sup>55</sup>

The travel guides of Woolf's sister, Bella Sidney, *How to See Ceylon* (1924) and *From Groves of Palm* (1925), constantly evoke the paradisaal beauty of Ceylon through Orientalist tropes and allusions to Keats and Coleridge, claiming that here the "milk of paradise" can truly be drunk.<sup>56</sup> However, Woolf eschews romantic

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<sup>55</sup> Woolf alludes to liaisons with native prostitutes in his letters. In a letter to Saxon Sydney-Turner, he included a poem dedicated "To Ponamma," his Tamil mistress. The poem plays on her name—"golden mother"—to depict her as mother and whore, exotic yet diseased, projecting his guilt onto her body:

O Golden Mother, in this embrace of thine  
Thy fruit of motherhood is bought & sold:  
The cancerous kiss, the ecstasy is mine,  
For then thy womb bears gold, Mother of Gold. ("Letters" 151)

For Woolf, Ceylon represented a zone of free sexual license with native women; however, he tended to view these relations with guilt, rather than idealizing them as a return to a sexual-no-sin-in-paradise.

<sup>56</sup> Bella Sidney Woolf cites "Kubla Khan" (1816) — "Weave a circle around him thrice and close your eyes with holy dread/ for he on honeydew has fed and drunk the milk of paradise" as well as couplets from Keats' "Eve of St Agnes" (1884): "Manna and dates, in argosy transferred/ From Fez; and spiced dainties, every one,/ From silken Samarcand to cedared Lebanon." By contrast, Leonard cites Coleridge only once, when he describes being marooned at sea: "'A weary time! A weary time!' Just as the ancient mariner found it" ("Growing" 81). It is the purgatorial "Ancient Mariner" (1798): which encapsulates Woolf's colonial experience, not Kubla Khan's catalogue of exotic pleasures. The only other poem which Woolf cites is Charles Elton's "Luriana, Lurilce," highlighting the mutability of his response to the "new" landscape of Ceylon ("Growing" 27).

descriptions of picturesque nature and avoids the usual tourist sites. When he does visit “Adam’s Bridge,” the archipelago at the northern tip of the island, he refrains from Edenic musing or ethnographic speculation:

Here I came upon an extraordinary spectacle, the graves of Adam and Eve. The graves were two enormous, smooth mounds of sand ...in charge of three Muhammadans. It was they who told me that these were the graves of Adam and Eve and that they would very much like me to come inside if I would take my shoes off...There was nearly a strange catastrophe. I heard behind me a shout of horror and...saw my dog trying to follow me into the enclosure. I was just in time to stop him...Thus were the graves of our first parents saved by a hair’s breadth from defilement by the dog of an infidel. Everyone was delighted, and in the small crowd...there were smiles and shaking of heads and lifting of hands. It was a red letter day for the 22 inhabitants of Talaimannar as well as for the acting A.G.A. (“Growing” 121)

Woolf portrays himself not as an intrepid explorer who has discovered a previously unnoticed marvel (the graves are not mentioned in other traveller’s accounts), but rather as a bumbling outsider admitted to a sacred site through the hospitality of its custodians, who nearly spoils the opportunity through his incompetence. Woolf consistently undermines what he calls the “crude exoticism” of his life in Ceylon, injecting bemused irony into his descriptions of land and people, and highlighting his ambivalent sense of “acting in a play or living in a dream” (21), unable to identify wholly with the imperial project, but also unable to comprehend or communicate fully with the indigenous culture. He invokes Ceylon as paradise only once, describing the Magampattu Game Sanctuary: “You were in the Garden of Eden. Immense herds of deer, buffaloes before the rinderpest, pig, elephants roamed about in the open paying hardly any attention to you” (“Growing” 207). However, he immediately follows with a detailed indictment of the “despicable butchery” (221) perpetuated by the colonial policy of selling big-game permits to European hunters. The sanctuary is Edenic only in contrast to the destructive colonial practices outside its borders: the burning of the highlands to clear land for plantations, the slash-and-burn village agriculture, the wanton shooting of game, the creation of railroads.



Despite his nascent environmentalism, Woolf is deeply ambivalent about the rainforest, refusing to romanticize jungle life, which he calls “horribly ugly and cruel” (“Growing” 212). In *Village in the Jungle*, the jungle is personified as a metaphysical force: “All jungles are evil, but no jungle is more evil than that which lay about the village of Beddagama” (4). In the highly poetic passage which opens the novel, the jungle is described as a hellish wasteland, a malignant tide:

It looks like a great sea, over which the pitiless hot wind perpetually sends waves unbroken...There are enormous cactuses, evil-looking and obscene...More evil-looking still are the great leafless tress, which looks like a tangle of gigantic spider’s legs...All the bushes and trees seem to be perpetually dying...the leaves withering...the twigs and branches decaying...And yet every year, when the rains come, the whole jungle burst out again into green; and it forces its way forward into any open space, upon the tracks, into villages and compounds, striving to blot out everything in its path. (4-5)

Later in the passage, Woolf’s odd, repeated use of the second person evokes an Western audience for whom he describes the scene from the perspective of the imperial overseer: “If you climb one of the bare rocks that juts up out of it, you will see the jungle stretched out below you for mile upon mile at all sides” (4). The natives are described as fatalistic savages, surrendering themselves to all-powerful natural forces, and at the conclusion, the jungle swallows their village, as if fulfilling an evil intent. Such personification recalls the dynamic of the anti-paradise which I have identified in the work of Anglophone writers in Mexico, where the suppressed guilt and nostalgia of the (post)colonial writer is projected onto the landscape. However, the remainder of Woolf’s novel is more complex than this initial “othering” suggests, refusing the fictional perspective of the colonial European penetrating the secret jungle and encountering his own suppressed horrors.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> White characters are absent from the novel, except at its conclusion, when the Hamadoru (AGA) acts as magistrate, sentencing the protagonist, Silindu, to life in prison after he murders the corrupt village headman.

Woolf does not write Ceylon as *Heart of Darkness*, nor even as *Under the Volcano*, though he might easily have portrayed himself as another guilt-tormented Consul. Rather, he writes from the perspective of villagers who have lived in uneasy balance with the jungle for centuries, until the introduction of a money economy under the British colonial administration, with its rigid hierarchies, corrupt headmen, steep taxes and land allocations, upset the communal traditions which enabled them to subsist.<sup>58</sup>

The power which they felt hanging over them was by no means imaginary...The life of the village and of every man in it depended upon the cultivation of chenas. ...The villagers owned no jungle themselves; it belonged to the Crown, and no one might fell a tree or clear a chena in it without a permit from the Government. It was through these permits that the headman had his hold upon the villagers...Every one in the village knew...that the Agent Hamadoru would never hear from Babehami whether [his friends] had cleared four acres or eight. (21)

The jungle's evil is directed not against the European but against the Sinhalese villagers, who are not lazy lotus-eaters without the need for work, but rather men and women who struggle to survive.<sup>59</sup> In this sense, the jungle tide, threatening to swamp the village, is a metaphor not only of nature, but of colonialism, which overwhelms and devours traditional ways of life. Woolf brings together the worlds of jungle and of the Hamadoru, the Sinhalese and the European, in order to give the lie to imperialism's claim that it improves the native's existence, showing instead how it distorts and destroys (Boehmer 190).

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<sup>58</sup> As Christopher Ondaatje notes, Woolf is strangely reticent about Ceylonese art, culture, or religion. In *Growing*, he expresses regret for the undermining of "ancient pastoral ways," wishes they could be preserved as they were "before Adam" but predicts their extermination after the introduction of the railway (31). In describing Katagarama, a church attracting Muslim, Hindu and Christian pilgrims, a "Ceylon Lourdes," he refuses to exoticize the religious site: "I dislike superstition wherever I find it...But at least there was something fundamentally genuine, primitively real there in the jungle....The beliefs were deplorable, no doubt, but the purity, simplicity, and their motives for taking the terrible journey to the temple I respected" (*Growing* 231). In *Village in the Jungle*, Katagarama is portrayed through the eyes of Silindu and Hinnihami, rather than a Western perspective.

<sup>59</sup> Woolf's letters and diaries sometimes replicate colonial racial hierarchies, as when he contrasts the "lazy, smiling, well-mannered, lovely Kandyans" ("Growing" 33) with the "ill-mannered Jaffna Tamil" ("Letters" 131). In his novel, however, these do not occur, perhaps because his attempt to imagine his way into the daily lives of rural Sinhalese villagers demanded the abandonment of ethnographic clichés.



*The Village in the Jungle* has been called the Sri Lankan equivalent to E.M. Forster's *Passage to India* (1924), combining an Anglo-Indian setting with a modernist aesthetic. Yet Woolf transcends Forster in his imagination of the encounter between Asians and the "West," incorporating oral forms and modes of address, transliterating local Sinhalese idiom, and refracting indigenous beliefs in the attempt to give a "view from within, of subjectivities which are in place in this environment" (Boehmer 207). The "significantly contradictory presence" of the jungle tide—"a world of bare and brutal facts, of superstition, of grotesque imagination"—embodies the dialogical agitation at the heart of the novel and reveals the contradiction between Woolf's stereotyping and his attempt to create internalized "native" perspectives (Boehmer 205, 209). Woolf precludes the possibility of native resistance, so intent is he on showing the destruction of their world. The total obliteration of the village at the novel's conclusion is reminiscent of the fatalism of Lowry's *Under the Volcano*. However, unlike Lowry, Woolf is writing before decolonization. If his novel displays elements of the anti-paradise, it is rooted not in neocolonial guilt, but rather in a sense of political urgency—the imperial power which threatens to swamp the villagers is still a very material presence. As a work of "symbolic decolonization," the success of Woolf's novel is not cancelled out by his over-determination of the jungle tide.

The trope of the jungle tide is reconfigured in the work of John Still, a British civil servant who began his career as a tea planter, but was appalled by the ecological destruction perpetrated by the plantations. He became an archaeological surveyor instead, fiercely advocating the formation of game sanctuaries and nature reserves: "Coffee and tea have destroyed so much of the wonderful forest life of the mountain zone that is more than time something was done to preserve and safeguard forever all that remains unspoiled" (35-6). A sympathetic writer, Still demonstrates an ecocritical sensibility and a genuine admiration for the different peoples he encounters: Tamils, Sinhalese, Veddas, "Moors," and gypsies. His *Jungle Tide* (1930) is an extended meditation on the jungles, wildlife, peoples, irrigation tanks, sacred temples, and ancient ruins of Ceylon, interspersed with ten poems. A central

theme of his writing is the tension between the threat posed to the indigenous culture and wildlife of Ceylon by the modernizing schemes of colonialism and the threat to modernity posed by the jungle tide, always poised to swamp over civilization. Still is morbidly fascinated by the way the jungle has completely overgrown the ruins of Sinhalese civilization, yet preserved other kinds of culture:

In the jungle, and in villages that were jungle-girt within the memory of their older inhabitants, religious practices, superstitions, charms, cures, and legends still survive that were old when the wave of Buddhism missionary enthusiasm swept down into southern Asia more than twenty-one centuries ago. [...] Buddhist culture has sunk far below its highest level...drowned in the jungle tide that flowed over city and village, temple and monastery, until their very names were lost...The jungle tide rose above all those strong things, but over the beliefs and practices woven into the lives of the jungle people who were members of its own fauna it rose harmlessly... (216-7)

The “woodcraft” Still learns from his forest companions is representative of this alternative culture. His essays fluctuate between hope that submerged cultures will survive as long as the jungle endures and anxiety that British colonialism is forever altering Ceylon. He is particularly ambivalent about colonialism’s claims to use modern technology to re-order space and thus improve the quality of life of the native.

In “The Holy Mountain,” Still reflects on the endangered “holiness” of Sri Pada. As he wrote in 1928, engineers planned to erect a vast hydro-electric dam at the base of the mountain which would turn the entire valley into a vast lake and harness “water-power” for industry. Still worries that the dam threatens the character of the holy mountain: “It is very difficult to yoke very, very ancient things with the newest improvements and preserve their old values; yet the power is there, and the wealth it promises draws men irresistibly to use it before it runs down to the sea” (34). Reluctant to condemn the modernizing, commercial aims of the project, yet aware that it constitutes industrial exploitation, Still proposes the lake should be preserved as a sanctuary, rather than leased to a company:



As the lake fills, it may become a part of one of the most beautiful places upon earth...a treasure garden full of interest to the botanist, the naturalist, the specialist in rare forms of teeming tropical life...the last refuge of the Ceylon elephant...To the anthropologist and the student of religions it would be a place where he would seek for legends and folk-lore and the wisdom of ancient times. And it would marry together the ideals of modern England and ancient Lanka...here, where the holy mountain will be mirrored in the water of the hydro-electric reservoir. (36)

Still powerfully evokes the paradisaical topoi associated with the mountain: *Samanalakkanda*, where millions of golden butterflies migrate to die on the sacred mountain; *Ganguli Hela*, “an echo perhaps of the story of the Garden of Eden (22); the peak itself, “one of the vastest and most widely revered cathedrals of the human race” (23). He adapts the paradise motif to suggest that instead of as a material gold-land, the British should value the mountain as a spiritual repository of “millions of manpower of reverence stored up through the ages” (17). Significantly, this spiritual treasure-garden seems to be at the disposal of Europeans, rather than indigenous people. Still’s proposal is couched in a fantasy of British colonialism as fulfilling the destiny of earlier Sinhalese civilization. Although Still knows full well that the lake will radically alter the ecology of the valley, he fantasizes that a compromise between the past and modernity can be reached, that a kind of artificial Eden can be built which satisfies both the need to preserve the endangered culture and landscape of the island (for European enjoyment) but also provides the capitalist gain and modernizing technology which colonialism demands.

However, this fantasy cannot hold, and at the conclusion of the book, Still’s ambivalence resurfaces in a lengthy passage describing the jungle’s ebb and flow over centuries, which recalls the opening and closing passages of Woolf’s novel. Here, again, the jungle is a dialogic force, both grotesque and imaginative, reflecting the contradiction between Still’s anxiety about the decline of British imperialism and his desire for the natural world to overflow the boundaries placed on it: “British imperialism is dying. [...] We are going to...stand aside and watch [the Asiatics] take

the front rank in the eternal struggle with the jungle. For the jungle tide always strives to flow, and ebbs no more than it is actually pushed back" (242-3). Like Lawrence, Still imagines that once decolonization occurs, the jungle tide may flow in and swamp over all the effects of the British colonial rule in southern Asia. This fantasy is apocalyptic, yet also what Still calls "hopefully doubtful," (241) offering the prospect that the jungle tide could undo the ecological changes which industrial colonialism has wreaked, reclaiming the tea plantations, the railways, the cities.

Visions of a regimented earth where birds only sing by request are to me so much more distasteful than the age-old struggle with the jungle tide, that I rejoice in an outlook that seems to the commercial utiliser of applied science horribly pessimistic. I do not think man will win final victory over the jungle; but rather that the battle will go on in the future as it has in the past...with the tide of the jungle ever ready to rise and flow over civilisation... (243)

Still reviles modern ideas of progress which aim to create a world where "gardens are to take the place of jungles, tame beasts to live in place of wild, and revolt to be supplanted by obedience" (241). He is critical of the modern capitalist drive to subjugate the environment and create regimented urban spaces. Furthermore, he accuses British colonial "efficiency" of obstructing the "natural advance" of native civilization. Like Woolf, he is aware of the artificiality of British governance and the irrelevance of Western epistemology to indigenous peoples with their own worldviews. However, unlike Woolf, Still seems hopeful that after the British leave the island, suppressed forms of jungle knowledge may re-emerge, and that the people might conceive their own organic compromise between modernity and nature. For Still, the jungle tide represents destruction, but also redemption from the total obliteration which concludes Woolf's novel.

However, *The Jungle Tide*, for all its sympathy for indigenous peoples, remains an ethnography "writing" Ceylon through the admiring eyes of a European. As in Corner's *Paradise of Adam*, the local people are largely reduced to "gold-mines" of cultural information which validate his stance of authority *within yet opposed* to colonial structures. Where Corner claims alternative knowledge in order to negotiate



a position of power for women within colonialism, Still negotiates an environmentalist stance. He privileges his romanticized version of Nature over the lives of the rural jungle people, implying that they are threatened by colonialism, but never actually showing the impact of colonial policies on the daily life of the village, as Woolf does. His “green” sensibility leads him to emphasize the threatened and threatening natural world over the economic and material realities facing the indigenous people. This tendency to romanticize nature reappears in the anthropologies and ethnographies which follow Still’s *Jungle Tide*, particularly those of the anthropologist R.L. Spittell. Spittell’s *Savage Sanctuary* (1941) and *Vanished Trails* (1950) mourn the disappearance of the aboriginal peoples, the Veddas, nearly extinct by the 1950s. Spittell adopts Still’s rapturous admiration for the natural world, but bears tragic witness to the failure of Still’s optimism—the “old trails” which Still describes at the end of his book have become “vanished trails” in Spittell’s. Lost cultures, peoples, and wildlife become a nostalgic, contradictory marker both for the ravages of the colonialism and the anxieties accompanying decolonization.

In the mid 20<sup>th</sup>-century, Anglophone writing about Ceylon is haunted by misgivings about the ways in which capitalism has simultaneously modernized and underdeveloped the country, destroying indigenous agriculture, damaging the environment, and creating one-sided economic growth. In *Ceylon, Pearl of the East* (1950), former planter Harry Williams observes, “The illusion of material progress has...deceived Britain herself, who now has to suffer for it; but grafted upon an eastern race, once cultured, it has led to some unhappy results, chief among them being the debasement of the peasantry” (73). Yet Williams is fearful of the “Ceylonization” of public institutions and remained committed to British administration as the only source of progress. Science fiction writer Arthur C. Clarke approached the problem of Ceylon’s underdevelopment and “endangerment” by transferring the theme of nature in tension with modernity into a different genre.

An expatriate living luxuriously in Colombo, Clarke describes his first visit to Ceylon in 1954 as igniting a life-long “love affair” with the island.<sup>60</sup> Amidst Clarke’s prodigious output, there are numerous non-fiction books about Ceylon,<sup>61</sup> and his penultimate novel, *The Fountains of Paradise* (1979), is set in a futuristic Sri Lanka. The representation of Sri Lanka in his non-fiction is steeped in the paradisaal mystique of Sindbad, Taprobane, and Serendip. Clarke always refers to the nation as Ceylon, the “fabulous East” or the “Emerald Isle,” rather than Sri Lanka, as if to erase the fact of its independence and inscribe it as a mythical land of desire, frozen in an exotic past.<sup>62</sup> Ceylon’s “strange attraction” for Clarke derives from its ancient ruins, tracts of rainforest, and wild animals which reflect “the world before man”(119). Yet, Ceylon is no longer “pristine” territory ripe for exploration; it is a paradise on the verge of extinction. “In another decade,” Clarke laments, “alas, they will be gone” (119). However, a passionate deep-sea diver, Clarke salvages paradise by transferring the trope from land to sea, proclaiming the blank spaces of the Indian Ocean “one of the last great unexplored regions of this planet” (“View” 112).

Interestingly, a German scientist at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century rehearsed this same move in his travel narrative, *A Visit to Ceylon* (1883). For Ernst Hæckel, widely credited as the first ecologist, Ceylon was “the promised land” of his desires as a naturalist (3.1).<sup>63</sup> However, while expressing his sense of “constant wonder and delight” at the “prodigal vegetation” of Ceylon, he was disappointed by the colonial government’s encroachment on the jungle, reducing “forest-primeval” to “garden-wilderness.” Thus, Hæckel transferred his search for virgin wilderness to the teeming

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<sup>60</sup> As the most famous Western resident of the island, Clarke was elected to play Leonard Woolf in the Sinhalese film, *Baddegama*, an adaptation of *Village in the Jungle*, in deference to his neocolonial status. His performance is completely against Woolf’s character.

<sup>61</sup> Clarke’s non-fiction works on Ceylon include *The Coast of Coral* (1956), *The Reefs of Taprobane* (1957), *The Treasure of the Great Reef* (1964), *Indian Ocean Treasure* (1964), *The View from Serendip* (1967), and *Sri Lanka: The Emerald Isle* (2000).

<sup>62</sup> “There are islands in the Pacific perhaps more lovely and temperate than Ceylon, but they have no culture, no sense of the past—nothing to engage the intellect. Ceylon offers far more than the empty, mindless beauty that lured Gauguin to destruction; it has twenty-five hundred years of written history, and the ruins of cities that were once among the greatest in the world” (“View” 117).

<sup>63</sup> A prominent advocate of Darwinism, Ernst Hæckel coined the term ecology. His invention of a general morphology of organisms, organized by ascending scale of development, was later misused to justify theories of scientific racism in Nazi Germany. Hæckel’s extraordinary, technicolor illustrations of ultramarine life in Ceylon can be seen in *Kunstformen der Natur* (1904).





Figure 5: “Pedifoggers” (above) and “Bellagemma Jellyfish” (below)  
from Ernst Haeckel’s *Kunstformen der Natur* (1904).





“ultramarine paradises” of the reefs: “in purity and splendour of colouring, the sea creatures are even more remarkable than the fauna of the forests” (9.1).<sup>64</sup> Hckel’s rapturous descriptions and exquisite illustrations of “coral fairy bowers” (see Figure 5) anticipate Clarke’s declaration, fifty years later, that the coral reefs surrounding the southern coast of Ceylon are “the new playgrounds of our age” (119). In the neocolonial age, the sea becomes one of the last uncolonized spaces, full of its own unexploited marvels and treasures. Clarke achieves his fantasy of an oceanic paradise and underwater treasure-house when he discovers a hoard of silver rupees in the sunken wreck of an 18<sup>th</sup>-century Arab merchant ship (“View” 28).<sup>65</sup>

In *The Fountains of Paradise* (1979), however, Clarke shifts the paradise myth into the future in order to imagine Sri Lanka as a utopian space in which man’s technological progress can come to fruition. The novel is organized around a central scientific conceit, the creation of a Space Elevator on the island of Taprobane which will convey humans and cargo from earth to outer space without the need of rocket ships. Brilliant, obsessive engineer Vannevar Morgan’s project to complete the tower is paralleled in the novel by the myth of the doomed Kalidasa, one of Taprobane’s ancient kings.<sup>66</sup> Desiring to exalt himself to god-like status, Kalidasa builds fabulous pleasure gardens at Yakkagala: “Here at the foot of the Rock, he had conceived and created Paradise. It only remained, upon its summit, to build Heaven” (25).<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Ironically, Hckel procured coral specimens by prying them loose from the reef with a crowbar, thereby destroying his pristine paradise. Rather than questioning his approach, he attributed violence to the reef itself:

The..Medusae...burn him wherever they touch, like the most venomous nettles; the sting of the fish...is as painful and dangerous as that of the scorpion...Worst of all is...the coral itself. The numerous points and angles with which their limestone skeleton is armed, inflict a thousand little wounds at every attempt to detach and remove a portion...But what are these transient sufferings to a naturalist when set in the scale against the fairy-like scenes of delight...among these marvellous, coral-groves!” (9.3).

The burns and stings of Hckel’s reef replicate the fevers and pestilence associated with the tropical jungle; the diver penetrating the ultramarine paradise suffers as purgatorially as the explorer penetrating the African interior.

<sup>65</sup> Ironically, Clarke donates this treasure not to a Sri Lankan museum, but to the US Smithsonian Institute, mirroring the way 19<sup>th</sup>-century British “collectors” pillaged Buddhist temples to send artefacts back to the British Museum.

<sup>66</sup> Kalidasa is a fictionalized version of King Kasayapa I, described in the *Culavamsa* chronicle.

<sup>67</sup> A fictionalization of Sigiriya, “Lion Rock,” the marvellous fortress-palace constructed by the ancient Sinhalese which features exquisite cliff frescoes of Lankan maidens and fountains fed by an intricate irrigation system. Sigiriya was designed to glorify its ruler as a celestial being, a “God-king.”



However, this artificial paradise is built in blood: Kalidasa murders his father, kills countless slaves in laying the irrigation works, and blinds the artist who paints his frescoes. After he is slain by his avenging brother, the Gardens are abandoned to the jungle. Two millennia later, Morgan appears as the Promethean inheritor of Kalidasa's vision. His Babel-like elevator, named "The Tower of Kalidasa," aims to launch humanity into the heavens. However, unlike the barbaric king, Morgan sees religion as a tribal relic. He chooses to build his tower not on Yakkagala, Kalidasa's mountain fortress, but rather on Sri Kanda, the last stronghold of traditional Buddhism, where monks protect the sanctity of the ancient site of pilgrimage.<sup>68</sup> The monks staunchly oppose Morgan's plans to transform the holy mountain into an industrial space elevator, flinging thousands of commercial freighters into space. Yet, despite proving their legal claim to the mountain, they unexpectedly vacate the monastery when a meteorological accident blows a swarm of yellow butterflies onto the summit, fulfilling an ancient prophesy that the Holy Mountain would fall when butterflies stormed its gates.<sup>69</sup> Elated, Morgan sets about stripping the peak of every vestige of 2000 years of Buddhist inhabitation, but leaves Kalidasa's Rock untouched.

The novel advocates the destruction of ancient Buddhist culture and nature in favour of modern technological progress, representing the monks as destroyed by their own superstition, while eliding the trauma of the erasure of Buddhist tradition through the conservation of Kalidasa's rock as a sanctuary of the arts—Taprobane preserved as a spectacle of erotic frescoes and mad kings. Clarke enacts a neo-imperial fantasy through the science fiction genre, portraying the advanced West as entitled to use the resources of the "backward" East in order to achieve its superior vision of civilization and scientific progress. While the West is initially balked by the irrational, mystical world-view of the East, religious barbarism is conquered by enlightened science. Morgan completes Kalidasa's destiny by building heaven's bridge, implying that only

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<sup>68</sup> Sri Kanda is the fictionalized version of Sri Pada, Adam's Peak.

<sup>69</sup> This echoes the British conquest of Kandy. Sinhalese legend predicted that whichever invader entered the Kandyan fortress on horseback, carrying the tooth relic, would become the next rulers of the kingdom. The British usurped the ritual of the Perahera to affirm their supremacy. Clarke similarly effects the "defeat" of the Buddhist stronghold through the myth of the golden butterflies.

the West can fulfil Eastern history through its continued stewardship of its former colonies. This powerfully recalls John Still's fantasy of a compromise between the holy mountain and the hydro-electric dam. Clarke rationalizes the cultural and environmental desecration of the holy site because it serves the dual aim of launching a viable new technology and modernizing Taprobane. The ecological anxiety which Clarke demonstrates in his earlier non-fiction is sublimated in the myth of capitalist progress. The novel's peculiar silence in respect to ethnic tensions between Tamils and Sinhalese is also significant, given that it was written in 1979, on the brink of civil war. Clarke's dismantling of the Buddhist stronghold is an improbable fantasy in which the rhetoric of competing Buddhist and Tamil nationalisms is dissolved and an age of harmonious, technological abundance is instituted by Western rationalism.<sup>70</sup>

This utopian caprice stands in stark contrast to Romesh Gunsekera's dystopian view of Sri Lanka in *Heaven's Edge*, as I will discuss. After the communal violence of the 1980s, tourist representations of Sri Lanka shift towards the tragic, so that it is imagined as the "teardrop island," "India's fallen tear," no longer the island of marvels, of utopian possibility, but a paradise lost, presided over by the angel's flaming sword. In the next chapter, I will investigate how postcolonial Sri Lankan writing engages with the legacies of the plantation economy, tourism, and colonial racism and with contemporary myths of modern Sri Lanka as a fallen paradise plagued by violence and permeated by nostalgia for lost privilege.

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<sup>70</sup> By recasting the conflict as East versus West, progress versus tradition, Clarke suppresses recognition of the origins of the current struggles in Sri Lanka in modern myths of race. Likewise, Kalidasa's parricide and death at the hands of his brother reinforces the myth of Sri Lankan history as characterized by violence and dispossession that cannot be alleviated without Western intervention.



## Chapter 6

### **“Make Your Own Eden”: Violence, Myth and Ecology in Romesh Gunsekera**

“It is difficult/ to face Paradise now or Eden”

- Jean Arasanayagam, “The Inheritors” (1991)

Modern Sri Lanka has been called a mirror of “ethnicity’s infinite regress,” where the formation of race-based identity categories and political elites in the colonial period has borne terrible fruit. The invention of modern Sri Lankan national identities has been accomplished by the “selective forgetting of culturally mixed and hybrid pasts,” the construction of “authentic, pure, and stable present ‘ethnic histories’” and the projection far back into the past of racial myths that are “essentially modern sociopolitical formations” (Rajasingham-Senanayake 25). Prior to colonial intervention, Sinhala and Tamil linguistic groups shared cultural and religious practices and intermarried. However, in addition to polarizing racial identities along the axis of language and religion, the British employed a “divide and rule” policy, creating a subaltern elite to occupy the bottom rung of the colonial administration. A disproportionate number of English-language schools were located in the mostly Tamil-speaking north. The subsequently English-speaking Tamils were seen as more dependable by the colonial administration and were given a higher percentage of the coveted civil service jobs than their share of the island’s population. Until the passage of the Free Education Bill in 1944, education in the English language was the preserve of the elite, driving a wedge between Tamils and the majority of ordinary Sinhalese. A smaller Sinhalese and Burgher elite aspiring to the economic and political status of the British formed in the lowlands as a result of prolonged efforts by the Portuguese, Dutch, and English to educate natives within the framework of European history and culture (Perera 186).

Although in the first years of anti-colonial struggle there was an attempt to balance the interests of the political elites of both the Sinhalese and the Tamils in favour of a common socialist agenda, many Sinhalese harboured resentment that the Tamils enjoyed a privileged position under the British. The dominant culture of early nationalist struggle was rooted in Buddhist revivalism. The British attempt to educate the lowland commercial classes in Protestant Christianity backfired, resulting in the emergence of a non-conformist "Protestant Buddhism" and the rise of Sinhalese activists with an inclination towards the "speechifying of nationalism" (Kiernan 81). Sri Lanka achieved full independence in 1948. In the elections of 1947, D.S. Senanayake's United National Party (UNP) formed a coalition with Solomon Bandaranaike's *Sinhala Maha Sabha* and Ponnambalam's Tamil Congress to which the British agreed to hand over power. In 1949, the coalition government disenfranchised the Indian Tamil plantation workers, who accounted for 10% of the population. Before the 1956 parliamentary elections, the ambitious Bandaranaike broke with the UNP and created the Sri Lankan Freedom Party (SLFP). The SLFP betrayed the Left consensus to keep both Sinhalese and Tamil as official languages, campaigning on the slogan "Sinhala Only." The infamous law mandating Sinhala as the nation's sole official language was passed in 1956. Supporters heralded the law as an attempt to distance Sri Lanka from the postcolonial elite and their British masters. Opponents viewed it as the linguistic majority's attempt to impose its will on minorities. Caste operated as the repressed signifier which enabled the consolidation of a bipolar Sinhala-Tamil "ethnic" divide (Rajasingham-Senanayake 40).

Bandaranaike's government promoted Sinhalese interests in the endeavour to reverse the imbalance of power between the Sinhala majority and the English-speaking Christian-educated elite.<sup>1</sup> Thousands of Tamil civil servants were forced to resign due to lack of fluency in Sinhala. Throughout the 1960s, Tamils were denied government services, and in 1972, the constitution officially named the nation Sri Lanka and

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<sup>1</sup> Bandaranaike was assassinated in 1959 but quickly succeeded by his widow Sirimavo, who continued to promote policies favouring the Sinhalese over the Tamils.



declared Buddhism the state religion. Tamil places were reduced at universities, spurring civil unrest in Tamil areas, where Tamil youths began to form militant groups to fight for an independent homeland. The same period saw the rise of Rohana Wijeweera's *Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna* (JVP). The Marxist JVP felt that the "old Left" had failed to produce revolutionaries from the masses and organized an underground militant movement led by students. JVP cadres campaigned for the Sinhalese UNP, but threatened violent rebellion if Bandaranaike failed to address the interests of the proletariat. In 1971, the JVP launched a student insurgency against the government. Over two weeks of fighting, 15,000 youths were killed, brutally suppressed by army security forces.

The post-independence government initially pursued an inward-looking socialist agenda, nationalizing plantations and greatly improving the standard of living and literacy. However, in the 1970s, in response to pressure from foreign experts, Sri Lanka adopted a liberalized economic model pursuing the development of Export Processing Zones and accepted Structural Adjustment Programs in exchange for international loans (Hancock 215). The economy shifted from plantations and pearl-mining towards export-oriented industrialization, soliciting foreign capital to produce manufactured goods and services.<sup>2</sup> By shifting towards a market-oriented economy, permitting expansion of multinational corporations and subcontracting networks, and accepting IMF and World Bank conditions, the government institutionalized structural inequalities which deepened poverty, increased sex trafficking, generated a gendered industry, and encouraged wage bondage (Pyle 56).

The 1970s-1980s saw the continued rise of Sinhalese nationalism and Tamil disaffection in reaction to race riots and the burning of the Jaffna Public Library. Secessionists fighting to establish a Tamil homeland in northern Jaffna formed the *Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam* (LTTE), and in 1983, LTTE militants ambushed

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<sup>2</sup> Plantation crops declined to only 20% of exports, while textiles and garments reached 63%. This strategy resulted in the mass incorporation of young women into modern industrial systems with poor working conditions (Hancock 215). Female workers are preferred because they can be paid lower wages and are considered unlikely to resist working conditions, refuse repetitive tasks, or organize unions (Pyle 62).

and killed 13 members of a military patrol. The government paraded the bodies in Colombo, sparking the notorious “Black July” riots, in which Sinhalese lynch mobs armed with electoral lists of Tamil households killed over 3000 Tamils. The state-sponsored pogrom inaugurated a full-fledged civil war and prompted a massive diaspora in which Tamils moved north or left the country, while Sinhalese migrated south from Jaffna, thus restructuring the country according to colonial divisions of space (Perera 187). During the Eelam War I, the government struggled to put down the multiple insurgencies of the LTTE, now pioneering the use of suicide bombers and terrorist attacks, and the JVP. The arrival of the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) initially oversaw a cease-fire, but soon provoked full-scale conflict with the LTTE, abusing their force and committing human rights abuses in the north. During two subsequent phases, Eelam War II: 1990-1994, and Eelam War III: 1995-2001, the sight of burning bodies became common along roadsides in the north and east. Across the country, government death squads hunted, kidnapped, or killed Sinhalese and Tamil youths suspected of being JVP or LTTE sympathizers. Over 65,000 Sri Lankans have died in the last three decades of civil war.

## **Sri Lankan Writing in English**

“In ’88, the Sri Lankan civil war/is your permanent backdrop”

- Dipti Saravanamuttu, “Landscape Art” (1988)

It is against the background of civil war, nationalist ideology, and ethnic conflict that much of Sri Lankan writing has been written and read. Writing from the 1950s-1960s was energized by nationalist currents and caught up in the debate over whether to employ English, which the radical poet Lakdasa Wikkramasinha<sup>3</sup> called “the language of the most despicable and loathsome people on earth” (Goonetilleke

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<sup>3</sup> Wikkramasinha drowned at age 37, before he could fulfil his whole promise. Nonetheless, poems such as “Don’t Talk to Me About Matisse” remain powerful critiques of imperialism: “Talk to me instead of the culture generally/How the murders were sustained/by the beauty robbed of savages: to our remote/Villages the painters came, and our white-washed/mud-huts were splattered with gunfire” (Goonetilleke “Modern” 40). Other poems rage against continuing class oppression in post-independent Sri Lanka, and call for cultural nationalist and socialist movements to redress cultural and material impoverishment.



"Modern" xiv). Poets and dramatists of Sinhala origin such as Ediriwira Sarachchandra and Bandula Jawardhana reinterpreted classical Sinhala history and legend in the attempt to forge a national Buddhist culture. Early Anglophone writers such as Rev. W.S. Senior and Patrick Fernando came mostly from the English-speaking westernized upper classes and their work was more concerned with adapting Yeatsian, Romantic, or Leavisite aesthetics to reflect Sri Lankan culture.<sup>4</sup> However, after the political events of the 1970s and 80s, the English-educated middle class were startled out of their complacency and Anglophone writers increasingly turned to an examination of political and social concerns. Poets including Yasmine Gooneratne, Anne Ranasinghe, and Jean Arasanayagam began to narrate the horrors of war and rebellion, displacement and dispossession.<sup>5</sup> Their poetry resounds with images of the civil war as a "torrent of blood," a tide of "darkness overwhelm[ing] the land." The insurgencies acted as a catalyst for literary expression, but also threatened to calcify the image of Sri Lanka as a paradise transformed into "a seared landscape," a "country of sorrow." In "Sri Lanka," Gamini Seneviratne asks bluntly, "Is Sri Lanka damned?" (Goonetilleke "Modern" 107), and Yasmine Gooneratne reflects, "There was a country where, when sorrow grazed/the heart but once the Muse brought forth her plenty/...The mine seemed inexhaustible" (Goonetilleke "Modern" 23). In response, Dipti Saravanamuttu's "Landscape Art" criticizes the reduction of Sri Lankan writing to a "permanent backdrop" of "carnage" and "rhetorical indoctrination" (Gooneratne "Celebrating" 365). Other poets such as Peter Scharen and Basil Fernando register the impact of globalization on Sri Lanka, as in Fernando's "The Weaving Mill," which depicts the reduction of village girls to alienated "ghosts" as a result of their employment in a textile mill.

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<sup>4</sup> See Patrick Fernando's collection of poetry, *The Return of Ulysses* (1955). The 1930s and 1940s school of poets who were primarily influenced by the Romantics and by Tennyson were known as the Kandy Lake poets; their literary education was restricted by the colonial curriculum, although they were partly inspired by Indian poets such as Tagore and Sarojini Naidu ("Modern" Goonetilleke xiv). In his famous poem, "Call to Lanka," Senior announces his desire to become "the bard of Lanka" and to "sing of Lanka/In the brave new days that come/When the races all have blended/And the voice of strife is dumb."

<sup>5</sup> Arasanayagam is an accomplished poet, short story writer, artist, and teacher from a family of Dutch Burgher descent. Her collections of poetry and short stories, including *Reddened Water Runs Clear* (1991), *All is Burning* (1995), and *In the Garden Secretly* (2000) powerfully explore the "seared landscapes" and "history of violence" in Sri Lanka, trying to dismantle racist ideologies, and criticizing the class, race, and gender hierarchies which restrict identities and fuel violence.

After 1990, a new generation of authors emerged, including Michael Ondaatje, Shyama Perera, Shyam Selvadurai and Karen Roberts, who have been labeled “post-colonial” and “post-modern” (Jazeel 583). Born in Sri Lanka or of Sri Lankan parentage but residing elsewhere, these writers display attachments to multiple places and their works are the product of globalization. Frequently, their writing advocates cultural hybridity and questions the stability of discrete identity formations—whether Sri Lankan, Tamil or Sinhalese, heterosexual or homosexual. Novels such as Roberts’ *July* (2001) and Selvadurai’s *Funny Boy* (1995) are Bildungsromane which directly represent the events of Black July through the naïve perspectives of middle-class Tamil and Sinhalese youths, while Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost* (2000) investigates the atrocities committed throughout the 1990s by the JVP, the LTTE, and the government from the viewpoint of a forensic anthropologist.<sup>6</sup> Consumed by Western audiences as “authentic” accounts of the country’s ethnic crisis, these novels are branded as “Anglo-Asian” literature and marketed for their “exotic” insights into the “tragic” island. Texts like Ondaatje’s *Running in the Family* (1983), an intricate memoir reconstructing his family’s hedonistic heyday in 1920s Ceylon, sometimes veer towards replicating melancholy stereotypes of Sri Lanka as a “darker paradise,” “in the shape of a tear.”<sup>7</sup>

In his travel memoirs, Christopher Ondaatje, brother of Michael, exhibits a cruder nostalgia for his family’s lost privilege.<sup>8</sup> *Man-eater of Punanai* (1992) intersperses

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<sup>6</sup> *Anil’s Ghost* has generated controversy amongst critics. *Pravāda* devoted an issue to reviews debating whether Ondaatje marginalized the Tamil presence in the text and demonized Tamil insurgents. Qadri Ismail argues that Ondaatje’s writing suffers from a “nostalgia for lost sovereignty” as a result of his exile to Canada and privileges Buddhist symbols from the chauvinist nationalist imaginary (24); Radhika Coomaraswamy rebuts that Ondaatje’s aesthetics are rooted in a Buddhist humanism that “radically challenges” the dominant culture of Buddhist chauvinism (29).

<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Ondaatje’s poetry collection, *The Cinnamon Peeler* (1989), exoticizes Sri Lanka as a feminized, sensual paradise, particularly through the figure of the cinnamon peeler’s wife proffering herself as the erotic embodiment of the aroma of cinnamon, the commodity which first attracted Dutch imperial desire: “I am the cinnamon peeler’s wife/ Smell me”(97).

<sup>8</sup> Descendants of Dutch Burghers, the Ondaatjes occupied a relatively privileged class in the British colonial administration: “The Ondaatje name was very well known on the island, associated with public service and private achievement for almost three hundred years” (“Man-eater” 34). Finding their aristocratic lifestyle threatened in the aftermath of independence, many emigrated. Christopher’s return to Sri Lanka is marked by nostalgia for the “Old World” of colonial privilege.



personal biography with ethnographic observation reminiscent of colonial hunting and shooting memoirs.<sup>9</sup> Safari references foreground Sri Lanka as a “hunter’s paradise,” yet the narrative is haunted by the spectre of terrorism. Ondaatje’s search for the man-eating leopard leads him into him into “the heart of terrorist activity” in the LTTE-occupied north, a symbolic “heart of darkness.”<sup>10</sup> He employs the familiar trope of the devouring tide to imagine Sri Lanka as a paradise inundated by violence:

The peaceful and prosperous imperial colony become a war-torn and poor Third World nation. Lives coming and going with the waves. Empires rising and falling with the waves. Factions fighting and dying with the waves. Kingdoms, corporations, families, individuals up for a moment of glory and down into decay and ruin with the waves. ... Waves, waves, waves. (118)

In *Wolf in Ceylon* (2005) Ondaatje continues his willed blindness to the reality of colonial conditions, idealizing Woolf’s colonial service and downplaying his anti-imperialist politics. His travels in Woolf’s footsteps are accompanied by nostalgic sepia-tone photographs of “exotic” natives. Long after decolonization, Ondaatje fetishizes Sri Lanka as an island of dharma transformed into the isle of tears.

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<sup>9</sup> Ondaatje cites passages from Samuel Baker’s *Eight Years in Ceylon* and Harry Storey’s *Hunting and Shooting in Ceylon* (1907), mining the imperial adventure genre for stories of British heroism. He compares Storey’s account of shooting a leopard at point blank range to his own face-off with two leopards: “I knew I should have been scared, but instead I discovered the remarkable sense of security that takes over when you face danger while looking through the lens of a camera” (123). The camera replaces the gun in Ondaatje’s narrative, enabling him to exercise the authority of the imperial narrative by “shooting” and mastering Sri Lanka through photography.

<sup>10</sup> The leopards he stalks with his camera become emblematic of both the island’s golden beauty and its threat: “I marvelled at [the leopard’s] circling, his waiting, his secretiveness, his timing. It reminded me of a terrorist ambush” (112). Relating the etymology of the word leopard, Ondaatje reproduces nationalist rhetoric, designating the Southern Buddhists extremists as insurgents, and the Tamil Tigers as terrorists: “Whenever the trackers saw a leopard, they shouted, ‘Kotiya!’ [...] ‘Kotiya’ is actually the Sinhalese word for tiger. Leopard is correctly ‘diviya’ for males and ‘dividena’ for females. In fact, there are no tigers in Sri Lanka—except for the Tamil Tigers. I used to joke... ‘I came to Sri Lanka to find leopards, but all I’ve found are Tigers’” (115). Ondaatje’s implication is clear: leopards are “natural” to Sri Lanka, Tamils are not. Playacting the (neo)colonial hero, he sublimates his fear of the terrorist by conflating the (Tamil) tiger with the leopard, so that when he “shoots” the leopard, he defeats the terrorist as well.

Contemporary Western popular media perpetuates the neocolonial imaginary of Sri Lanka as a “flawed jewel” despoiled by the “demons” of terror.”<sup>11</sup> A recent travel article in *The Independent* exclaims “Civil War in the Jungle: The Demons that Haunt Sri Lanka” (Huggler 1), while another article in *The Telegraph*, “The Tide has Turned,” retells the myth of the demon-princess Kuveni’s desertion by the Lion Prince in order to explain the current conflict :

The jilted woman laid a curse on the prince’s entire country, condemning Sri Lanka to eternal turmoil. This curse has burnt its way through the centuries as invaders from India and Portugal, from Holland and Britain, brought tumult to the island. More recently conflict between the Tamil Tiger separatists and the Sinhalese majority mauled Sri Lanka, until the signing of a truce in February 2002... Is the princess’s curse at last beginning to lift? (Bolt par. 2)

This tendency to mythologize Sri Lanka’s conflicts as historically transcendent has been resisted in another vein of fiction. Ambalavener Sivanandan’s *When Memory Dies* (1998) meticulously exposes the complex socio-political phenomena of the nation’s colonial and postcolonial history from a subaltern perspective, charting three generations of one family as they are impacted by colonialism, communalism, class-warfare and terrorism. Crucially, Sivanandan excavates the repressed links between race and class, revealing the historical processes, not demons, behind the current conflict. Similarly, Carl Muller’s exuberant trilogy, *The Jam Fruit Tree* (1993), *Yakada Yakā* (1994), and *Once Upon a Tender Time* (1995) constructs an alternative view of Sri Lankan history from the perspective of working-class Burghers whose creolized presence disturbs the polarity of national debates over identity and reveals the unequal class structures bequeathed by colonialism and perpetuated by the postcolonial elite.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Mimi Spencer’s 2005 article in the *Guardian*, “East of Eden” which refers to Sri Lanka as “the other Emerald Isle,” “this flawed jewel,” and “some sort of paradise,” and concludes, “Sri Lanka may be shaped like a tear-drop, but the beauty of this place will make you smile” (5).

<sup>12</sup> The dark-skinned descendants of interbreeding between Portuguese, Dutch, Sinhalese, Tamils, and East Africans became known as Burghers by the Dutch, considered racially inferior to European colonialists (Jackson 618). Burgher communities persist along the coasts, near old forts such as Galle and Colombo, but are dwindling as a result of diaspora sparked by civil war. A creolized form of Portuguese persists in Burgher oral and musical traditions like *baila*, while Burgher culture is expressed in traditional foods such as *lamprais*, *breudher*, and *bolo fiado* (Jackson 618).



Rather than approaching Sri Lankan writing as a catalogue of trauma, this chapter will focus on how the broader material conditions in Sri Lanka which produce ethnic conflict, ecological destruction, and social corruption are reflected in Romesh Gunsekera's informal trilogy of novels, *Reef* (1994), *The Sandglass* (1998), and *Heaven's Edge* (2002).<sup>13</sup> Gunsekera is an expatriate who chooses to write in English, rather than his first language, Sinhala, and whose residence in England has necessarily reshaped his memory of Sri Lanka (Jazeel 584). His original publisher, Granta, has a reputation for producing high quality travel literature, and capitalized on Gunsekera's intensely lyrical, sensuous prose by marketing his first novel as "a love story set in a spoiled paradise," an "Asian Tempest." His short-story collection, *Monkfish Moon* (1992) and Booker-nominated *Reef* benefited from the surge of Western interest in the "postcolonial exotic." Analysis of Gunsekera's writing must therefore attend to his reception in the global market and examine whether he resists reifying Sri Lanka. Nonetheless, I will argue that Gunsekera's deployment of paradise motifs is intended neither to evoke nostalgia nor to imagine the violence in Sri Lanka as historically transcendent, but rather to deconstruct (neo)colonial imaginaries, to reveal the causal relationships between environmental degradation, armed conflict, and competition for resources, and to expose the deleterious effects of global capitalism on the modern nation.

## The Devouring Reef: Signifying Ecological and Political Crisis

"Of his bones are coral made;  
Those are pearls that were his eyes  
Nothing of him that doth fare  
But doth suffer a sea change  
Into something rich and strange"

—*The Tempest* 1.11

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<sup>13</sup> My analysis excludes his most recent novel, *The Match* (2006), whose setting is divided between London and Manila and whose primary motif is cricket as a symbol of possible reconciliation.

Gunasekera's first novel, *Reef*, opens in Britain with an encounter between Triton, the protagonist, and an attendant at a petrol station. Recognizing that the attendant is Sri Lankan, like himself, Triton addresses him in Sinhala but the attendant replies in broken English that he is Tamil, a refugee from Silvatturai. Struck by a wave of memory, Triton imagines the man's home: "I could see a sea of pearls. Once a diver's paradise. Now a landmark for gunrunners in a battle zone of army camps and Tigers" (2). This polarized opposition between paradise and war-zone is typical of neocolonial representations of Sri Lanka as ultramarine Eden or isle of tears. Triton's encounter with the Tamil refugee unleashes the memory of his childhood employment as a houseboy to Mister Salgado, a rich Sinhalese marine biologist in Sri Lanka. As the tale of Triton's complex relation to Salgado and his privileged friends unspools, his initial memory is replaced by a more complicated image of the country and his place within it. Gunasekera does not directly represent the formation of the JVP and the LLTE, nor the events of 1971 and 1983. Instead, the politics of the post-independence era are subtly registered as tectonic shifts, as Triton's political consciousness increases incrementally in response to fleeting social encounters.

As a young houseboy, Triton is wholly in thrall to his Prospero-like master. Triton's detachment from the public sphere outside Mister Salgado's charmed circle is reminiscent of Ishiguro's butler in *Remains of the Day*. He questions neither his servitude nor the ethics of Salgado's elite social position as a scientist sponsored by the nationalist government. When Salgado's friends discuss Mrs. Bandaranaike's implementation of policies privileging upper-class Sinhalese and provoking growing unrest amongst the lower classes excluded from socialist reform, Triton remains silent, perceiving their conversation as irrelevant. When he is recruited by Wijetunga, a Marxist JVP-supporter who explains Wijeweera's "Five Lessons" about "the crisis of capitalism, the history of social movements and the future shape of a Lankan revolution" (111), Triton replies, "But I am only a cook" (111). Towards the end of the novel, after being pejoratively addressed as *kolla* and *bugger* by Salgado's guests, Triton has an epiphany of his class relation and thinks, "Wijetunga...had worked it all out" (153). Nonetheless, when Salgado flees the country in 1971, Triton accompanies



him to London. Only at the novel's conclusion does Triton envision a life of historical agency, "without Ranjan Salgado standing at my side" (180).

In *Reef*, political struggles are subtly mapped onto the geography of the teeming underwater world circling Sri Lanka's coasts. A reef colony is a living skeleton, inhabited by tiny transparent polyps which build on the remains of their predecessors. In his 1950s writing on Ceylon, Arthur C. Clarke fantasized that the Indian Ocean coral reefs represented the last virgin territory to be penetrated by Western explorers, an ultramarine paradise. However, Gunsekera's novel is driven by a profound awareness of the ecological crisis posed to Sri Lanka's reefs, now as endangered as its jungles and land wildlife. Traditional fishing methods in Sri Lanka were sustainable, using non-motorized crafts and employing non-destructive techniques (Rajasuriya 4). Likewise, coral-mining formerly targeted only fossilized "relic" reefs, until the boom of the construction industry stimulated a demand for lime production from living reefs (Rajasuriya 3). After the 1970s, the government's transition to an export-oriented economy has promoted new technologies at the expense of conservation.<sup>14</sup> Tourism and industrial development in coastal areas further contribute to reef pollution.<sup>15</sup> In the last three decades, severe damage to Sri Lanka's near-shore reefs has caused large-scale "coral bleaching" in which the living veneer of the reef dies, leaving only its white skeleton.<sup>16</sup>

In *Reef*, Triton witnesses the destructive practices leading to coral bleaching. On the borders of Mr. Salgado's deep-sea research station at Yala, Triton is horrified to see "skull-heaps of petrified coral-five-foot pyramids beside smoky kilns—marking the allotments of a line of impoverished limemakers, tomorrow's cement fodder,

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<sup>14</sup> New technologies such as bottom-trawling, dynamite-blasting, and cyanide poisons cause severe damage to reefs and their eco-systems, as does uncontrolled collection of fish and corals for the ornamental export industry (Rajasuriya 4).

<sup>15</sup> Most coastal hotels are constructed without proper planning for waste disposal, while the coconut and rubber-based industries, food processing plants, paper mills and distilleries lack facilities to separate waste materials from effluents released into waterways. The sea has become a natural dumping ground (Rajasuriya 5).

<sup>16</sup> Tsunami battering and the rise of sea temperatures due to global warming and carbon pollution also accelerate shallow reef death (Monagurusamy 5).

crumbling on the loveliest stretch of the coast” (59-60). When he takes Miss Nili to buy fresh, exotic fish for her dinner, she is nauseated by the aura of death pervading the marketplace: “Outside a man was filling an unmarked van with baskets of dead fish. Small pieces of bleached white coral decorated the municipal parking lot” (118). The reef is being sacrificed to meet the needs of the impoverished landless classes, the limemakers, fishers, and stall-keepers who cannot survive in the global market without something to sell.<sup>17</sup> In a reversal of the novel’s epigraph from *The Tempest*, “of his bones are coral made,” the coral itself dies and is transmuted, not into something strange and lovely, but into concrete, parking lots, property. Man is not transformed by nature, but rather, nature is desecrated by man. The dead coral is a visible marker of the ecological crisis precipitated by the pressures of capitalist global modernity in Sri Lanka.

Mister Salgado wistfully dreams of creating coastal refuges to protect the ultramarine world: “If only we could make the whole coast like Yala. A sea sanctuary, with not a soul there” (161). However, this solution is impracticable, as demonstrated by the Hikkaduwa Marine Sanctuary, whose reefs have been gradually worn down due to unplanned tourist development. Far from promoting eco-tourism, reef-walks, diving, glass-bottom boats, souvenir collection, and the discharge of effluents from hotels and boats have resulted in a radical reduction of the live coral cover (Rajasuriya 2-3). The creation of sanctuaries does not address the economic policies underlying the capitalist exploitation of natural resources, nor does it rectify the structural inequalities which drive impoverished coastal dwellers to (unwittingly) destroy their environment. Furthermore, Salgado’s fantasy of preserving the sanctity of the entire coastline by expelling its indigenous inhabitants is dangerously similar to the discourses of purity and ethnic exclusion used in nationalist rhetoric to construct the idea of Sinhalese or Tamil homelands and to expel ethnic Others. Despite his scientific rationalism, Salgado resorts to Buddhist myths of Lanka as a “paradise of demons” to articulate an imaginative geography of the island’s despoilment:

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<sup>17</sup> Nearly half of Sri Lanka’s population live in coastal districts. Extreme poverty aggravates fishing and mining in coastal reefs; landless people end up at water’s edge, trying to earn a livelihood from the last natural resource available to them (Monagurusamy 4).



Africa, the whole of the rest of the world, was part of us. It was all once one place: Gondwanaland. The great landmass in the age of innocence. But the earth was corrupted and the sea flooded in. The land was divided. Bits broke and drifted away and we were left with this spoiled paradise of *yakkhas*—demons—and the history of mankind spoken on stone. ( 84)

For Salgado, Sri Lanka's island-ness is a "fate that pre-dates and contains the country's tensions: an inescapable geopolitical reality, almost organic by nature" (Jazeel 594).

Rather than conceiving a solution to the ecological or political crisis, Salgado pessimistically predicts the eventual destruction of Sri Lanka's reefs and coastlines and the subsequent submersion of the island:

This polyp is really very delicate. It has survived aeons, but even a small change in the *immediate* environment...could kill it. Then the whole thing will go. And if the structure is destroyed, the sea will rush in. The sand will go. The beach will disappear. (48)

Salgado's "toxic discourse" of reef endangerment and environmental flooding is correlated with the social panic caused by the rising tides of insurgency by Marxist revolutionaries and Tamil secessionists.<sup>18</sup> Encircling the island, restraining the sea's violence, the reef is integrated into nationalist and liberationist notions of insularity, which imagine Lanka as a homogenous, bounded entity, belonging to one people or the other, obscuring its true geographical origin as an island among islands, connected in a land bridge to the subcontinent. The reef thus becomes an ambivalent symbol in which the signifiers of ecological crisis and class inequalities are repressed and overwritten with the signifiers of ethnic violence and political conflict. Ironically, as coastal erosion increases, the political rhetoric of insularity intensifies.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Lawrence Buell defines toxic discourse as the "rhetoric and ethics of imagined endangerment," which arises "both from individual or social panic and from an evidential base in environmental phenomena" (27, 31). Salgado's discourse of reef endangerment is clearly rooted in scientific evidence, but it also functions as an expression of political and social panic.

<sup>19</sup> See Tariq Jazeel's discussion of geography and the discourses of insularity in relation to nationalist political rhetoric in "Unpicking Sri Lankan 'island-ness' in Romesh Gunesekera's *Reef*" (2003).

The novel's repeated imagery of coral "skull-heaps" reinforces the association between reef death and human death. Earlier in the novel, Triton uses the metaphor of the jungle tide: "The whole country had been turned from jungle to paradise to jungle again, as it has been even more barbarically in my own life" (5). However, the jungle is supplanted by the encroaching sea, the blood-tide, as a symbol of the cycle of ethnic violence whose end is unforeseeable. Triton reacts to the news of the 1983 pogrom by retelling the myth of the mass-murderer Prince Ahimsaka, who believed he had to kill "for the good of the world, to become a wise and righteous king" (166). On the beaches of Ahimsaka's kingdom, the tide washes in "the bodies of men who had disappeared from their homes, who had been slaughtered...and thrown in the sea... every morning they reappeared...bloated and disfigured, rolling in the surf" (166). Ahimsaka's violent delusion mirrors the militant rhetoric of Wijetunga who argues to Triton, "Our country really needs to be cleansed, radically. ...We have to destroy in order to create. ...Like the sea. Whatever it destroys, it uses to grow something better" (111). Yet from the bones of the Tamil and Sinhalese dead, no coral will be made, no regeneration will be achieved, no righteous Lion King will reclaim his throne.

Despite Salgado's luminous descriptions of the "fabulous" abyss, when Triton finally sees the reef, he is frightened by its exuberance. The reef is no fairy wonderland, but rather a "jungle of writhing shapes" and voracious fauna:

Suspended in the most primal of sensations, I slowly began to see that everything was perpetually devouring its surroundings. I swam into a sea of sound; my hoarse breathing suddenly punctuated by clicking and clattering, the crunching of fish feeding on the white tips of golden staghorn. My own fingertips seemed to whiten as trigger-fish, angel-fish, tiger-fish, tetrons, electrons and sandstone puffer-fish swirled around me, ever hungry. (176-7)

This Darwinian image of a "devouring reef" is invested with a radical alterity that signals the threat posed to Sri Lanka's culture and environment by the modernizing



schemes of global development.<sup>20</sup> Triton's vision of a chaotic, primal, marine world disrupts Mister Salgado's classification of the flora and fauna of the reef and coasts, suggesting that nature is not so easily ordered by man (see Figure 6). The empirical reality of the reef resists fantasies which attempt to render it into an object of man's desire, the "erotic sea" (130) (see Figure 7). The trope of consumption also implies that the country is devouring itself, feeding on political myths of paradise and islandness which can only lead to violence.

Triton's description of the reef comes near the end of his recollections, revealing how far he has come from his initial memory of Sri Lanka as a "diver's paradise." Gunsekera exposes fantasies of Sri Lanka-as-paradise as underwritten by prejudice and exploitation: "Remember, this was also known as the Garden of Eden. It panders to anyone's chauvinism, you know: Sinhala, Tamil, aboriginal" (85). However, the novel risks succumbing to an exilic logic in which the homeland is romanticized as a "paradise lost." The temporal-spatial "breach" provoked by Triton's encounter with the Tamil refugee precipitates his return, in memory, to the island of his childhood. As he narrates his transition from solipsism to political disillusion, it is tempting to view Triton as cast out from the paradise of childhood harmony with his culture and environment. Throughout the text, Sri Lanka is represented by the characters as an endangered or already-spoiled paradise, with the reef as the anti-paradisal figure signifying political and ecological anxieties about the erosion of the nation-state.

Yet *Reef's* epigraph from *The Tempest* suggests a way of reading Triton's personal history as a narrative of transformation rather than loss. Hannah Arendt compares Walter Benjamin's historical thinking to pearl-diving:

Like a pearl diver who descends to the bottom of the sea, not to excavate the bottom and bring it to light but to pry loose the rich and strange, the pearls and the coral in the depths, and to carry them to the surface, [Benjamin] delves into the depths of the past—but not in order to resuscitate it the way it was and

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<sup>20</sup> As Wijetunga warns: "All they see is pockets full of foreign money....Don't they realize what will happen? They will ruin us. They will turn us all into servants. Sell our children..." (111).

to contribute to the renewal of extinct ages. What guides this thinking is the conviction that although the living is subject to the ruin of the time, the process of decay is at the same time a process of crystallization... (55)

Similarly, Triton's plunge into memory leads him to re-examine all that was rich and strange about his past, but also to realize that his childhood had been a period of ignorance, rather than paradisaal innocence. Unlike Salgado, who chooses to return to the "far-away house of sorrow," Triton does not try to recapture paradise lost, but rather to seize agency in the present. He rejects originary myths in favour of a historical consciousness of dispossession and resistance: "Human history is always a story of somebody's diaspora: a struggle between those who expel, repel or curtail—possess, divide and rule—and those who keep the flame alive from night to night..." (174). The decay of his former self crystallizes his new identity as an "cosmopolitan itinerant...without a past, without a name" (180). Therefore, in *Reef*, Gunasekera uses the paradise motif to criticize environmental degradation, demystify national myths of the island, and demystify the migrant's memory of the homeland.<sup>21</sup>

However, Triton's personal acquisition of a diasporic consciousness offers no solution to the environmental crisis of reef erosion. Instead, the novel registers the displacement of ecological concerns for myths of Buddhist cultural revival and economic progress, showing how the government abandons Salgado's project of reef conservation in favour of the exploitative modernization scheme of the Mahaweli Dam.<sup>22</sup> "A nationwide concern for inland seas grew as politicians invoked the spurious visions of ancient kings" (119). In his next two novels, Gunasekera delves deeper into the structural conditions underlying environmental destruction and social corruption in Sri Lanka.

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<sup>21</sup> Gunasekera has repeatedly underscored this point in interviews. He admits that lost paradise is one of his "central obsessions": "That sense of a lost paradise is something I have...because that's how people look at the past—often, though not always, however traumatic the past might be, actually the loss of it is even more traumatic" (Hall par. 19). However, he recognizes that the desire to retrieve time can be pathological: "What runs deeper is a sense of identity and difference—the whole notion that no one ever really belongs in one place. Even animals migrate" (cited in Hussein 1).

<sup>22</sup> Engineered by foreign developers, the controversial scheme is the largest Third World development project, aimed at radically altering the ecology of the North Central zone. Under the scheme, vast tracts of Wanniyalaeto hunting-lands were allocated to new settlers. Displaced indigenes were refused equitable compensation.





Figure 6: Exhibition poster for the “The Garden of Earthly Delights” series by Indian artist Raqib Shaw. Studded with precious materials and gems, Raqib’s marvellous canvases satirize and titillate the insatiable Western appetite for fantasies of South Asia as erotic sea and economic treasure-land. The series creates images of erotic hyper-consumption, transporting Bosch’s garden into an ultramarine world in which monstrous creatures and gods from Indian myth disport with fantastic phalli.





Figure 7: Detail from “The Garden of Earthly Delights III.” Raqib Shaw (2003).



## **“New Arcadia”: Plantation-Machines and Haunted Hotels**

In *The Sandglass*, Gunsekera continues to investigate themes of diaspora and memory, but shifts his critique from reef endangerment to the impact of economic development in post-independent Sri Lanka. The novel is peopled by migrants and descendants of migrants on quest to excavate their personal histories and discover their cultural origins. The narrator Chip is obsessed with uncovering the personal history of Pearl Ducal, his adopted mother, particularly her exile from Sri Lanka after a feud with another upper-class family, the Vatunases. Prins, Pearl's son, and Chip's best friend, is similarly consumed with the idea of returning to his birth land and restoring the family's abandoned home, Arcadia. When Pearl dies, Prins returns briefly to England and Chip is spurred to narrate the complicated story of their family. The novel's central narrative takes place in London over the course of a day, when Chip and Prins are reunited at Pearl's burial. However, this timeline is constantly disrupted by diversions into past temporal, geographical settings, thus blurring the boundaries of memory and geography that hold the characters captive (Nasta 230-1).

In the first timeline of the novel, Gunsekera explores the construction of economic privilege in the immediately post-independence nation through the trope of Arcadia, the Ducal family's lost estate. Pearl's husband Jason purchases the nautically-themed mansion from an old English captain, who “had built the house as a kind of homage to a suppurating colonial dream: the dream of a voyage of adventure...” (23). For the captain, the house embodies his nostalgia for lost empire, but for Jason it represents the dream of postcolonial privilege. Between 1948 and 1977, the post-independence government pursued socialist policies, dismantling the colonial plantation estates and nationalizing industries. However, the reversal of colonial hierarchies in the political, social, and economic realm which took place when the Sinhalese nationalist government came to power led to the marginalization of other minorities and the creation of a postcolonial elite, rather than an equal society. Employed by a British-owned tea company, Jason is promoted to vice-president when the company is

“Ceylonized.” His occupation of the captain’s “big house” physically symbolizes his transition from the bottom of the colonial hierarchy to the height of the elite: “Jason seemed to have become a true colonial: a man obsessed with place and status—geographical and social” (23). Jason and his contemporaries “emulate the vanities of their pre-war colonial masters, trying to transform themselves into brownskin imperial successors” (103). However, Jason’s possession of Arcadia soon provokes conflict with his neighbour, Esra Vatunas.

Infuriated by the proximity of the *nouveau-riche* Ducals to his own mansion, “Bellevue,” Esra erects thorny hedges and burns rubbish and manure on its borders, only to find that “the smoke, the ash, the horse shit all affected Bellevue as much as Arcadia, and the border grew more luscious with every attack” (29). Esra and Jason become not only feuding neighbours, but business competitors racing to achieve a monopoly on sales of alcohol in the post-independence economy. Esra pushes his “ambrosial” arrack, Vambrosia, while Jason purchases a distillery and launches his own brand, only to be murdered by a thug, most likely hired by Esra.

Throughout the novel, landowning is described in pathological terms. Jason and Esra’s relationships to their estates generate fantasies of possession which lead to exploitation and violence, “the disease of the landed” (23); Pearl sells Arcadia because she believes land has “a propensity to fester” (89); and Prins crudely explains Sri Lanka’s history of ethnic conflict as “just a squabble about whose arse is on whose grass” (78). Even Jason and Esra’s surnames imply that their desire to manufacture paradises of privilege is doomed to corruption: “Ducal...was rooted in *dhukha*, sadness...Vatunas in the fallen” (93). The conflict between the houses of Arcadia and Bellevue becomes a microcosm of larger social tensions catalyzed by the privileging of the Sinhalese elite: “The big shots were laying down all these bloody laws of self-interest...The rules by which we have been stomping over each other for forty years” (97). It also encapsulates the political geography of the island, in which new fantasies are mapped onto the land with each shift in colonial and postcolonial power. The Vatunas land is described as bizarrely-shaped, sub-divided by Esra’s



father into plots of land resembling genitals. This “lewd land-map” of “procreative sculptures” (28) symbolizes the eroticization of the land throughout history as an object of desire, a feminine paradise to be conquered and possessed. However, Esra disowns his father’s lascivious vision by impressing his own fantasy on the land, describing his vulva-shaped estate as “the imprint of a divine hoof as God cantered to heaven from the island” (29). This religious fantasy obscures the land’s libidinal history beneath a narrative of purity which ascribes authority to its owner, mirroring the way in which post-independence nationalists created sterilized myths of a “pure” homeland.

In the novel’s second timeline, Gunsekera uses the trope of “New Arcadia” to critique the impact of Sri Lanka’s transition to a liberal economy and a tourist destination in the global economy. Following Jason’s death, Pearl migrates to London, where she remains, paralyzed by her memories of the past. However, her son Prins is discontent to remain in England, and returns to Sri Lanka to investigate his father’s death and rebuild his financial legacy. From 1970 to 1980, Sri Lanka developed its tourism sector into the fifth leading source of foreign exchange, marketing the “Four S’s” of “sun, sand, sea and sex” (Crick 307). The government’s emphasis on luxury tourism proved disastrous after the civil war began. The star class resorts created with long-term tax abatements could not be transformed after the disappearance of tourists into more modest facilities for domestic tourists, nor converted into schools, clinics or homes. The government’s desperation to bring back tourists weakened their negotiations with foreign investors and deepened their debt (Richter 43).<sup>23</sup>

Sri Lanka’s development of the tourist industry on the advice of foreign investors created an economy resembling the colonial plantation industry, resulting in dependency and a culture of servility (Richter 43). Far from promoting cultural exchange, the industry exploits remote destinations for their exotic qualities and

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<sup>23</sup> The recent tsunami proved even more devastating to an industry which had only just begun to recover after the 2001 ceasefire.

cheapness and depends on a series of unequal relations between powerful and powerless, wealthy and poor, men and women (Samarasuriya 1). The sudden advent of luxury tourism in impoverished areas disrupts existing value systems and promotes the exploitation of women and children. Foreign investors buy beachfront land for a pittance and erect hotels before villagers realize the value of the land. While some locals owning beach-front property are able to open guest houses and restaurants, most are forced to resort to illegal, demeaning sources of profit: hawking handicrafts and corals, peddling drugs, trading gems illegally, guiding tours, and prostitution (Samarasuriya 2). Young children from coastal villages are lured to resort areas such as Hikkaduwa and Negombo to serve as sex-slaves to older men, mostly from Western countries.<sup>24</sup> The increase of female, male, and child prostitution suggests that the tourist industry has failed to provide sustainable means of livelihood: "Sri Lanka is renowned as a pedophile's paradise and their numbers increase every year" (Samarasuriya 6, 10).

In *The Sandglass*, Prins dreams of regenerating Sri Lanka's economy. His capitalist fantasy of a financial Eden is yoked to personal nostalgia for the country of his origins, where he hopes to become "whole." He proves successful in the first boom of tourism and is appointed General Manager of a group of luxury hotels owned by a multinational corporation, Gold Sands Enterprises. Emphasizing the exotic experiences which they peddle to foreign visitors, the hotels are named after paradisiacal loci—Shangri-La, New Arcadia. Prins vacillates between profit-driven enthusiasm and cynical guilt about the impact of luxury tourism on the country. He criticizes the industry's insensitivity, environmental hazards, and economic unsustainability: "Sex, sun and sand. There's no damn future in it.' He could see it even then, sex would turn unsafe, the sun would become cancerous, and the sand slowly slip into the sea leaving behind only a squalid line of tarted-up pleasure domes" (10). He imagines reinventing the industry to "develop a modern cultural identity" (209), but mocks the commodification in which this results: "There are so many exquisite coffee-table books on the *resplendent* island, our *wild* wildlife and our

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<sup>24</sup> Children are also taken from plantation estate areas and used as domestics, tea-boys, drug mules, and beggars.



precious quaint Kultur that there's no room even for a fly to fart after breakfast" (228).

After the advent of civil war, Prins bemoans the futility of "selling the paradise experience between death camps and suicide bombers to tourists who didn't care" (195). Registering the shift in media representations of Sri Lanka from exotic paradise to political inferno, Prins imagines capitalizing on Western expectations of tragic violence. He sarcastically suggests developing "war-watching" as a "new kind of safari" for the hotel business: "Imagine: camouflage sarongs, sunset flares, Patriot missiles ...They say that this madness is what we do best, and it's better than the pimping of kids that passes for tourism now" (229). Through Prins' sardonic commentary, Gunesekera reveals how the metaphorical eroticization of the island as "sex, sun, and sand" results in the literal exploitation of its subjects. The pimping of kids is a product not only of tourism, but of the "war widow" phenomenon of the 1980s-90s. With the deaths of thousands of men through political conflict, many women sought employment overseas, leaving their children vulnerable to traffickers.<sup>25</sup>

Despite his criticism of the industry, Prins remains a committed entrepreneur. Falling in love with Lola Vatunas, Esra's daughter, he makes plans to build a garish new hotel on the Vatunas-Ducal property. In order to fund his enterprise, he enters into business negotiations with Dino Vatunas and a group of Japanese investors, only to become entangled in Dino's shadowy dealings with the "goons" and "thugs" who run the country. He accuses the government of profiting from the Eelam War, manipulating rhetoric while making their own corrupt financial deals to "disappear" their opponents: "Our bloody war: the people's war...Sinhala kids, Tamil kids, it's all the same. Fodder for the politicians. On every side the rich are scheming and the rest

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<sup>25</sup> Since 1984, hundreds of thousands of Sri Lankan women have been forced to become overseas sex workers, maids, nannies, or workers in export production networks in order to earn incomes in the restructured global economy (Pyle 55-7). Migrant contract workers face sexual exploitation, physical abuse, 18-hour working days, and a lack of access to leisure, recreation, or medical facilities (Enloe 192). Ironically, the 200,000 Sri Lankan women working in the Gulf States clean the homes and mind the children of other, more affluent Third World women (Enloe 193).

are reeling” (70). However, he refuses to relinquish his dream of reclaiming his father’s estate. Arcadia encapsulates his childhood, the lost paradise which he seeks to regain. His earliest recollection is of sitting in Arcadia’s garden, playing with a toy gun, surrounded by bright, hallucinogenic colours. Yet even this memory is overhung by a dark shadow: “I feel guilty. Like I shouldn’t remember. Some crushing sense of guilt...It somehow washes over it all” (77). He attributes the destruction of his family to possession of the house: “It should have been called... Château Mausoleum” (79). Prins’ feeling of complicity with the exploitative dynamics of tourism, industry, and social corruption is projected into his personal past, the toy gun the repressed signifier of the violence resulting from his economic activities and a harbinger of his father’s death and his own. He comes to see the civil war as caused by monolithic, immovable forces, shadows overhanging his existence which he can neither escape nor alleviate.

At the end of the novel, Prins disappears, mostly likely assassinated. He joins the “anonymous shadows... linked to the borders of Arcadia,” “the innumerable ones who vanish younger and younger with apparently increasing brutality all over the world” (247). As his childhood memory predicted, the dream of Arcadia, the false paradise of privilege, brings death. His attempt to preserve the house of memory as some dreamland of origins, whether colonial or nationalist, only results in its becoming a mausoleum. The Vatunas house, Bellevue, becomes a similar monument to death: “Behind the façade dressed in filigree, its last walls were no more than a day away from the ball and chain of the giant crane poised over it, but it still looked huge and grand and desolate. Its garden, and the gardens of the houses in its ploughed-up wings, had been reduced to a sea of scalloped grey earth, a graveyard of incurable dreams” (277).

Gunasekera’s novel is haunted by gothic visions of decaying mansions, plantation-machines run down, ghosts of star-class hotels ruined by the collapse of tourism. It concludes with a final vision of New Arcadia, seen by Chip, who returns to Sri Lanka in search of Prins’ body:



On one corner of the vast plot of Vatunas land...a large hoarding proclaimed the future: 'The New Arcadia'...There was an artist's futuristic drawing of an elegant garden hotel, shimmering in glass, with bougainvillea cascading over every recessed balcony and a column of starred features in bold red letters: air-conditioned honeymoon apartments, fantasy love suites, an Eros cinema and a subterranean ice rink with a Japanese snow machine. I stood in front of it waiting for Prins to rise, bucking again, out of the disputed ground of his imagined world to free the future from the shadows of the past. I wanted to hear him, or Pearl again, or the voice of the last of her displaced dreamline, Dawn, spin us forward from this hurt earth to a somehow better world. (278)

The garish luxury hotel is an ersatz image of redemption, a cartoon pleasure-palace. Prins' "new" Arcadia, selling paradise to the global elite, is no better than Jason's original colonial play-house. The Japanese snow machine is a reminder of dependency on foreign investors, a tacky commodity whose absurdity in the context of Sri Lanka's tropical climate implies the ill-fit of global economic imperatives and local culture. It also suggests the extent to which global capitalism manufactures illusions of paradise and progress. While mourning the loss of Prins, Chip is nonetheless skeptical of nostalgic narratives which mythologize the past, and capable of imagining a more humane future. His invocation of Dawn, Pearl's newly-born granddaughter, replaces the false image of regeneration, the capitalist New Arcadia, with a humanist new dawn.

However, a sense of the inevitability of violence haunts the novel, encapsulated in the image of the doomed Arcadia.<sup>26</sup> All the characters are paralyzed in some way by their experience of exile or bloodshed. Pearl refuses to leave her London flat; her son Ravi visits America in search of a new life only to return traumatized and suicidal. Chip spends all his time trawling through the past of a family not his own. Prins is

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<sup>26</sup> Gunasekera's Arcadia may be based on a real hotel. Rahul Jacob, a journalist for the *Financial Times*, reports travelling in Sri Lanka in 2002 and hearing a story about the "Arcadian Hotel" which he finds impossible "not to see as some kind of morbid metaphor": "Just as I was calling a travel agent to inquire about re-routing a trip home to India via Colombo, a friend told me of arriving at the same hotel a few years ago and witnessing blood-stained sheets being hurriedly removed and guests checking out en masse. The manager had been killed while trying to raise the alarm as criminals, reportedly demobilised thugs from one side or other of the conflict, tried to rob the hotel" (2).

obsessed with his father and his homeland, yet despite his business charisma, feels apathetic, helpless to influence the political climate. He retreats into his false paradise as a refuge from political violence, choosing to make money rather than campaign for change. The novel concludes in the early 1990s, when peace negotiations between the government and the LTTE seemed on the verge of success, but by 1998, when it was published, negotiations had broken down and violence had rekindled. As in *Reef*, the image of a “fallen” Sri Lanka, fatally embroiled in a cycle of violence and economic corruption, threatens to dominate the narrative, averted only by the fragile and perhaps trite metaphor of Dawn’s new birth, and the vision of a cosmopolitanism which could bypass sectarian allegiances and neocolonial hierarchies.

### **On the Edge of Eden: Auguries of Violence and Resistance**

*Heaven’s Edge* (2002) combines elements of the genres of romance, war chronicle, religious allegory, ecological thriller, and science fiction, within a matrix of allusions to European, Arabic, and South Asian myth.<sup>27</sup> The novel is set on a post-apocalyptic island resembling Sri Lanka, somewhere in the near future, after nuclear missiles have poisoned the land and destroyed the state infrastructure. As in Clarke’s *Fountains of Paradise*, the science fiction mode allows Gunsekera to explore Sri Lanka’s future, performing his own auguries of the island’s political and ecological condition after decades of civil war. However, unlike Clarke’s technological utopia airbrushed free of political tensions, Gunsekera’s unnamed island is a post-national dystopia reeling from perpetual violence and amnesia:

War here, like everywhere else, was once about land and identity. But after the death cloud in the south everything changed...we were reshaped by gangsters into new collectives held together only by conscription...not language, not religion, not any of those outmoded notions of nation. After so

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<sup>27</sup> In interviews, Gunsekera has stressed the novel’s indebtedness to Homeric epic and posited it as a re-working of the genres of the shipwreck narrative and the colonial explorer’s travelogue: “The journey that Marc goes on is the journey of the Odyssey, a journey into the apparently unknown, it belongs to a long tradition. Odysseus did it; Robinson Crusoe did it; Marlowe did in *Heart of Darkness*. ...Marc is a son looking for a father...a reluctant warrior” (cited in Hall 5).



many years of fighting, violence became ingrained into our way of life. So now we have only thugs for politicians and tyranny in every tribe. (37)

Taking its epigraph “Kill not the Moth nor Butterfly” from *Auguries of Innocence*, the novel clearly adopts Blake’s prophetic tone, imagining the evolution of ethnic conflict motivated by nationalist or liberationist ideology into habitual, tribal killing. Reflecting on Blake’s injunction against the destruction of the natural world, Gunsekera weaves together a meditation on violence with a discourse on environmental degradation. *Heaven’s Edge* is populated by multiple images of endangered gardens and sanctuaries, asking whether Eden can be recreated and innocence regained after the apocalypse, or whether violence is integral to self-preservation.

The novel’s protagonist, Marc, is a second-generation immigrant in postmodern London. He is alienated from nature and community, oppressed by a sense of acceleration “in a world spinning noisily out of control” (226):

By my early twenties, I decided the life of a recluse would comfort me more; release me from the recurrence of loss, the delusions of communal life...I sold the old house and moved into a cheap flat...It had no garden, not even a window-box...Like many of my dispirited, isolated neighbours I lived a life of junk, grease and sloth. (17)

After the death of his grandparents and parents, his *anomie* intensifies, and he decides to return to his father’s birth land. His visit represents more than a return to an ancestral homeland; it also extends the hope of reconciliation with nature, time, and community. Marc’s Telemachian odyssey is inspired by his grandfather’s Homeric tales of fabulous voyagers—Jason and the Argonauts, Sinbad, Robert Knox—and by Eldon’s descriptions of the island as an Arabian Nights fantasy of “golden dhows, catamarans and shoals of singing fish...a place where sea-lost sailors believed they would see the springs of heaven rise” (95). Eldon obsessively retells the story of his visit to the island with Marc’s father, mapping “the web of journeys that held him and his son together, like a memory of paradise” (8). Their grand tour of wildlife reserves, ruined cities, tea-hills, and coconut plantations ironically replicates the catalogue of

exotic sights visited by 19<sup>th</sup>-century Europeans. Eldon's greatest nostalgia is for the family's hill-country plantation, abandoned during the war: "I loved that place, my little Eden, so much more than the big manor house that our lot liked to pretend was the family heritage" (8-9). Eldon's lost Eden comes to obsess Marc, whose Lord-Jim-like imagination is dangerously consumed with dreams of romantic adventure.

Against the warnings of travel agents that the country is unsafe, Marc books his flight. Disillusionment begins with his first steps on the island. From a distance, it appears "entrancing," "phosphorescent," but the jetty leading to his hotel is "corroded," the beach "littered with dead urchins and broken crabclaws," the atmosphere "stultifying" (3-4). Like one of Prins' tourists in search of the paradise experience, Marc looks for the "hidden charm of a long-suffering but colourful land" but finds only desolation: "This could not be the same island that Eldon had talked about, that my father had loved that I had read so much about. I had seen no animals, no birds, hardly any life. The trees, the plants, the buildings, the land, everything was drab" (10-1). The island is blighted by political violence and environmental pollution, patrolled by gangs of anti-state guerrillas and army soldiers who compete to impose a state of total political and economic oppression. Marc is forbidden to leave his designated hotel, the inhabitants are prohibited to grow gardens, forced instead to purchase food from the warlords; their children are seized to serve in death-squads.

Through Marc's unreliable perspective, the novel's opening chapter cleverly recreates the language of contemporary media representations of Sri Lanka as a "spoiled paradise" haunted by demonic political forces.<sup>28</sup> However, Gunsekera also signifies

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<sup>28</sup> Consider Justin Huggler's 2006 travel article in *The Independent*: "Sri Lanka's east coast...is the stuff of tropical island paradise, a graceful curve of white sand with palm trees...and emerald water...But today the beach is covered in discarded rubbish. The hotels and beach huts are empty and boarded up; no tourists come here any more. As evening falls menacing packs of dogs roam the empty beach. [...] The tsunami is a thing of the past, and paradise is back in business. But all the while there is an air of impending disaster. If you drive through the jungle in the east, you can see herds of wild elephants crossing the road. Long-tailed monkeys watch you go by from the trees. At night, fireflies hang by the roadside, and green snakes are caught in the car's headlights as they slither across the tarmac. This is the unspoilt Sri Lanka tourists flock from around the world to see. But these days even the elephants are on edge. They watch as Sri Lankan soldiers set fire to the foliage they feed on. The fires burn through the night and send blinding columns of smoke into the sky" (par 1.)



the vicious casual cycle induced by the ecological damage of war and the subsequent competition for resources (Gleditsch 392). Environmental degradation and civil war are integrally linked in Sri Lanka.<sup>29</sup> The government burns unspoiled jungle to destroy guerrilla cover, while both LTTE rebels and government forces participate in the mass-felling of palmyra palms for construction of military fortifications (Butler 1). Since 1986, the use of artillery, aerial bombs and incendiary devices has become routine, creating a wasteland of debris and craters throughout the Vanni and Jaffna, destroying the fragile eco-systems of the dry-zone forests and agricultural lands (Saverimuttu 4). The state's military thrust against the LTTE's territorial base not only destroys jungle cover, but reduces the natural resources of Tamil Eelam, making reconstruction harder (Saverimuttu 9). Forest sanctuaries and nature reserves are frequently violated by hunters, illegal loggers, and military patrols.<sup>30</sup> Ironically, "the land that is at the root of the war is also being destroyed by the war" (Saverimuttu 9), a conviction echoed in the novel by Eldon's assertion that "the shape of the land itself had [been] changed" (9).

Despite the island's decidedly anti-paradisiacal conditions, Marc exoticizes it as "this apparent pearl of an island" (6), "island of dreams" (12), "island of the devout" (15), and "emerald island" (19). Yet as his tourist imaginary is continually disturbed, he begins to comprehend that the island's aura of silence signals not mystery but the suffering of the politically oppressed: "The sense of subjugation was not something I had expected on an island infused with myth and mystery. This was a place...devoid of any joy past, present or future" (9-10). Still, Marc's romantic visions are renewed when he falls in love with a beautiful local woman. Through Uva, who is named after the interior province of the former Kandyan kingdom, Gunsekera explores the representation of the island-nation as a feminized paradise in nationalist and tourist discourses.<sup>31</sup> In Marc's idealizing vision, her name identifies her as a repository of

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<sup>29</sup> Demonstrating Herbert Marcuse's argument in "Ecology and Modern Society" that social violence and ecological crisis are the twin products of capitalism. Gleditsch diagrams the process: "war→ environmental destruction→ resource conflict→ exacerbated armed conflict" (392).

<sup>30</sup> The random-firing of naval cannons by government forces also damages coral reefs.

<sup>31</sup> Uva is also the name of the province in which Leonard Woolf set his novel about the village in the jungle, *Hambantota*.

lost traditions and culture, a female embodiment of Kandy, an object of erotic desire, to be penetrated or possessed:

Uva. I recognized it as the name of my grandfather's favourite strong black tea, but she told me it was the name of a region of high mountains, the home of venerable old gods and forest folk in perennial rebellion. 'We have always had to fight for our freedom,' she had grinned, 'against waves and waves of your brass-balled colonizers. (25-6)

Through her budding, tragic romance with Marc, Gunesekera adapts W.H. Hudson's critique of the impact of imperialism on the South American rainforest in his classic novel *Green Mansions* (1904) to the context of modern Sri Lanka.

Like Rima, the Amerindian in Hudson's "green romance," Uva is a human embodiment of Nature, a bird-woman perpetually described in connection with doves, butterflies, and flight. She is also a self-professed "eco-warrior" who plants hidden gardens in resistance to the warlords, living in secret, solitary harmony with the rainforest. When Marc first encounters her, he is trudging through the scrub jungle, hoping "to observe some real wildlife" (13). Then Uva emerges like a jungle-spirit, releasing a pair of emerald doves: "A thrashing of wings startled me. I twisted around. She stood there... A radiant face, her whole body held taut....She had a cage open; another dove was flapping in her hand" (20). At their second meeting, he tries to touch her: "In her hair I noticed a scrap of yellow. As I reached to remove the leaf, it unfolded into a small butterfly and fluttered towards the water. She shrank back" (21). Like Abel's first touch of Rima, Marc's gesture subtly disturbs her relation with nature—the butterfly resting in her hair—and demonstrates his own lack of perception. Uva questions his presence and intentions, because she knows they impinge on her entire life: "What are you doing? [...] Why have you come?" (21). She is reluctant to involve herself with Marc because of his naïve persistence in mythologizing her and the island, his drive to possess her. She attacks his equation of erotic bliss with the return to paradise, demanding that he opens his eyes to the political and cultural conditions surrounding his tourist idyll: "We live in a state of terror. Can't you see it? ...You think that just because we can jiggle our hips together



everything is all right?...Look at this seedy hotel you are stuck in...What have I said to you about how we have to survive?" (27, 39). Nonetheless, like doomed Rima, she begins an affair with Marc, telling him stories about her family and culture in the attempt to pierce his complacency.

Through Uva's storytelling, Gunsekera narrates the political, cultural and ecological history of the island, and explores the gap between the tourist imaginary and actual material conditions. Re-telling a myth which titillates Marc's imagination of the island's "exotic" past, Uva describes the site of the first Eden:

Near Samandia was the place...where the first inhabitants of the island had been awakened by butterflies splashing dew at the dawn of time. The dew formed a lake and their wings a floating stairway spiraling up to heaven. It was here that the first human drowned and ascended to become a god, or according to others, where the first couple—Adam and Eve—were expelled to become real lovers, descending on steps of mortal confetti; their loins swollen, their fingers entwined, their lives ignited. Once a realm of pilgrimage and veneration, it was forsaken after the neutering of the south-west, the devastation of the lower rainforests by rogue missiles and botched nuclear deterrents. (94)

Missing the implications of the story, Marc imagines himself as Adam and Uva as Eve, and dreams of migrating to the sacred realm to enjoy a paradise of sexual pleasure. Samandia is an adaptation of *Samanda-kanda*, "the hill of the god Saman," a foothill of Adam's Peak where at "certain times of the year countless millions of butterflies stream out on migration...going on pilgrimage to end their short lives on the sacred mountain" (Still 22-3). In *The Jungle Tide*, Still imagines the lake-sanctuary being created by the Mahaweli Dam in this region "where the miraculous is held to be as probable as the ordinary" (22). Both Still and Clarke project utopian visions onto Adam's Peak, imagining the "sacred mountain" existing in harmony with the modernizing schemes of the hydro-electric dam and the space-elevator. However, in Gunsekera's dystopian vision, technological progress only results in man's permanent alienation from the land, producing the nuclear bomb as the apogee of its

achievement. Furthermore, Uva's re-telling of the Eden myth in the context of the island's current destruction gestures to how myths of origin fuel pathological discourses of sectarian violence.

The "green" ethic of Uva's stories about her family history also communicates Gunsekera's awareness of how post-colonial countries have been damaged by imperialism and globalization, damaging not only personal subjectivities, but also ravaging the environment. Uva's father, an artist and ranger in the Forestry Commission, was inspired by ecology: "You know the very first sanctuaries on earth were on this island" (35). Her mother was the descendant of "coconut king" entrepreneurs who "cleared forests and planted imperial crops for three generations...making money; taking, never giving" (36). Together, her parents create an Eden-project where they hope to recreate a pre-colonial Buddhist mode of existence:

Uva's mother had found a place high up in the hills, unspoiled, from where she could reintroduce the natural world into the overexploited cashlands of their denuded province. Her mother wanted these to return to a richer jungle rather than the leached scrubland that retreating global markets and destitute governments left in their wake. 'My father built with her a home using tiles like in the olden times, and protected the wilderness there as a refuge for the birds, the animals, the insects, the plants that were being destroyed by all those profiteers.' (36)

In the last decade, Sri Lanka has had one of highest deforestation rates in the world, with only 1.5% of the island's original rainforest remaining (Butler 1). Most rainforest was lost under British colonial rule, when the highlands were cleared, and in the post-independence era, when the expansion of coconut and rubber plantations and the development of industry further stripped the jungles. However, the greatest threat to Sri Lanka's biological wealth is not civil war, but greed fuelled by the rush to capitalize natural assets in the global economy: "Many wetlands and other critical ecosystems in the 'war zone' have been spared the pillaging that follows the



‘economic development’ agents, who treat all land as a commodity to be exploited for instant economic gain” (Butler 4).

Uva’s parents’ experimental plantation, Farindola, is intended to counteract the exploitative economic and ecological practices fostered by corrupt governments and global markets. Uva’s vision of “green resistance” is similarly utopian, rooted not in technological progress, but in the creation of an ecological paradise: “There will be birds everywhere...and clouds of butterflies like flowers in the air. We will each have a garden of our own” (39). However, the novel questions whether such a vision is as fragile, even destructive, as Marc’s own exotic fantasies, whether radical ecological transformation can be achieved without violence. Her parents are killed by a local war-lord, who seizes Farindola for his own pleasure. As a result of her involvement with Marc, Uva is tracked back to her hidden garden and disappears, while Marc is kidnapped by soldiers and taken to an internment camp. Disappearance is at the core of the narrative in three different timelines: the disappearance of Marc’s father Lee, of Uva’s parents, and of Uva herself. The novel is haunted by the loss of homes—Eldon’s hill-country Eden, Uva’s Farindola, Marc’s recreated Samandia—not colonial mansions as in the *Sandglass*, but “green mansions,” emblems of man’s fraught relationship to the natural world.

Marc’s search to find Uva leads him out of the quarantined tourists’ enclave and onto a symbolic journey through the island’s history, as he travels from the coast through the abject landscapes of the military occupation, to the ruined plantations of the hill country, and finally, to the mythical valley of Samandia. First, he is taken from the internment camp to Maravil, an “official leisure zone.” Through the Carnival Mall, Gunsekera extends his critique of the tourist industry’s fostering of sex tourism, constructing a futuristic vision of total commodification, a mall of shops and bars selling only sex, an hallucinatory underworld where there is no day or night, only the exchange of credits and bodies. Marc’s imprisonment in this infernal paradise, the reverse of Uva’s dream of gardens, ironically glosses Robert Knox’s incarceration in Raja Singh’s Kandyan kingdom. To escape, Marc enlists the help of two inmates,

Kris, Uva's brother, and Jaz, a flamboyant call-boy dressed in a sarong and fantail bustle. If Uva embodies the "natural" bird-like spirit of the island, Jaz is her alienated opposite, an artificial bird-man bred to dwell underground and trade his body in the consumer palace. His wild, plumed costumes demonstrate not his harmony with the natural world, but his function as an advertisement for the island's erotic promise: "Maravil's most erogenous creature."

Leading the escape, Kris slays several guards and incites Maravil's drug-doped inhabitants to rebel against their oppressors. Under cover of the riot, the trio flees into the countryside, where they encountered a bombed village, occupied by wounded orphans, "mutilated remains of an assortment of communities where pain had passed like a malady from one jumbled generation to the next...children...condemned to destroy their progenitors, or remain fractured themselves for ever" (109). Unable to make sense of this communal destruction, Marc resorts to myth-making. Discovering an abandoned irrigation tank and the traces of ancient frescoes in the devastated village, he recites a poem from the *Mahavamsa*:

The teardrops of the original inhabitants  
our old gods,  
destroyed by invaders,  
wreak perpetual revenge on their descendants (111)

Like Mister Salgado's image of Sri Lanka as the already-spoiled paradise of "yakkas," Marc represents the island as fated to violence. He is comforted by poetry's power to anesthetise suffering: "The words absorbing, renewing... transforming even pain into a line, a scrap of verse, a rhyme" (111). However, Jaz criticizes Marc of mythologizing the village and obscuring its historical particularity: "You just love...poems and all that. But the fighting here is not because of some hoary old demon" (111). Gunsekera explores the tension between the material and the aesthetic throughout the novel, presenting artists and dreamers—Eldon, Lec, Marc, Uva, her parents—whose visions risk succumbing to essentialist myths. He privileges the artist's project of imagination, but implies that it must remain conscious of historical processes and ethical imperatives.



Abandoning the abject village, Jaz, Kris and Marc arrive next at Farindola, now converted into an ostentatious pleasure-palace for a warlord. Kris kills again to protect them, slaying the estate's elderly caretakers. Seduced by their sumptuous surroundings, Jaz and Marc are tempted to give up their quest to find Uva's Samandia. However, they are disturbed by Kris's murders and by their memories of the island's "ruined children" (109). Marc slowly becomes aware that Farindola is another false paradise, tainted with the blood of those slain to attain it. His growing conviction of the impossibility of escaping external political realities is confirmed when their idyll is wrecked by the arrival of soldiers and Kris and Jak sacrifice themselves to enable him to escape.

Fleeing to the edge of the grounds, Marc discovers a fabulous peacock-shaped aircraft, the mythical *dandumonara* described in the epic of the *Ramayana* (see Figure 8).<sup>32</sup> Like the Buddhist *Mahavamsa*, the *Ramayana* mythologizes the first migrations from the continent to the island. It imagines the "island-ness" of Lanka in relationship to the Tamil mainland, connected by an archipelago, yet broken away, "other." It is a land of magical origins, an object of desire, yet demon-infested, needing to be "purified." The epic represents the aboriginal inhabitants of the island as demons whose resistance to subsequent waves of invasion locks the island into a fatal cycle of violence and retaliation. By invoking the Hindu *Ramayana*, Gunsekera examines Sri Lanka history not only from the perspective of Western, Arabic, or Buddhist myths, but instead constructs a polyphonic, poly-historical gateway into the past which unites the opposing mythologies.

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<sup>32</sup> The myth of the peacock-craft is narrated in the *Ramayana*: Ravana, the demon-king of Lanka, becomes angered when Rama begins to clear the forest of demons. Plotting revenge, he flies to Rama's dwelling place in India and seizes Rama's beloved, Sita, and transports her in his peacock sky-chariot across the waters to his island fortress, Ravana-Kotte. In retaliation, Rama declares war against the demon-king. Unable to cross the sea, he enlists Hanuman the Monkey God to construct a bridge of stones across the strait (known as Adam's Bridge in Islamic myth) thus reconnecting the island to the mainland. Rama vanquishes Ravana and purges the island of demons (i.e. its original inhabitants).



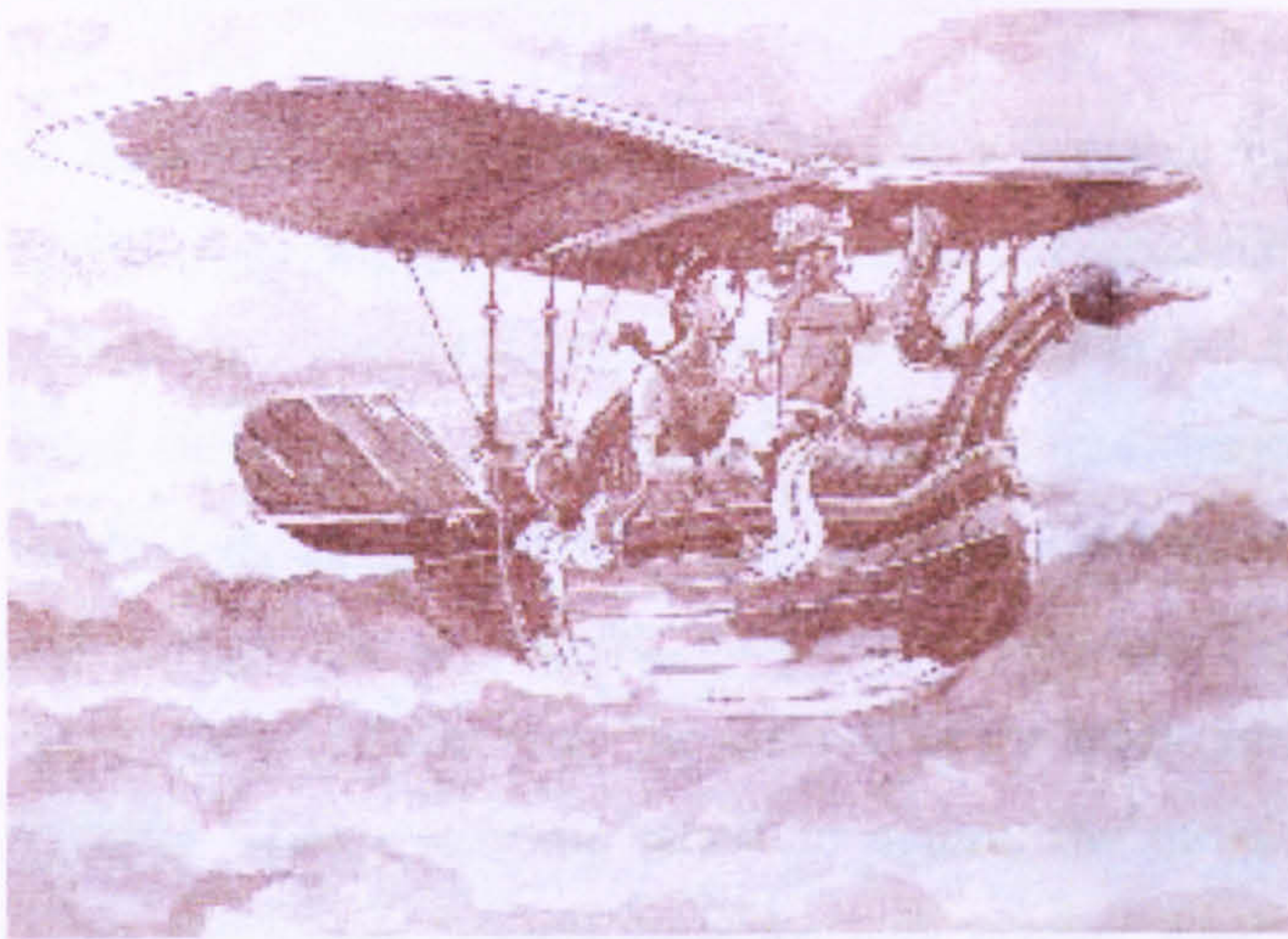


Figure 8: Ravana and Sita in the *dandumonara* (above left); a traditional *garuda* mask (above right).

The narrative grows increasingly mystical as Marc soars out over the hill-country and plunges into the valley below, finally entering the secluded realm of Samandia. Like Uva and Jaz, Marc is associated with the hybrid figure of the *garuda*, half-human, half-avian, which appears throughout the novel as a symbol of the artist, man “evolving” into flight.<sup>33</sup> His longing to find Eden suggests that his flight is an attempt to reverse modernity, to evolve backwards into a former relation to nature, man becoming bird. However, like Icarus, he plummets from the sky, suggesting that the longing for paradise is treacherous, and like the demon-king of Lanka whose flight to India launched a war, his possession of Samandia results in violence. Flight is a signifier of possibility, but also of escape into a prelapsarian past. Gunesequera questions whether myths can be separated from their ideological connotations. Marc’s flight is not merely mythical, but entangled in political and ethical concerns, since it echoes the bombing missions of his father, Lee, an “air warrior” in the state’s last war. As Marc’s consciousness of the island’s material realities grows, he wrestles with the question of whether patriotism can ever be ethical, whether his father’s participation in the nationalist campaign helped accelerate the cycle of ethnic conflict.

<sup>33</sup> Gunesequera describes the importance in *Heaven’s Edge* of “flight in the imaginative sense, in the aspirational sense, in the mythical sense, and the physical sense” (cited in Hall 3). Uva’s father carves *garuda* figures, while her mother yearns to create an ashram for all the birds of the air because she believes “they were the souls of us all” (21).



In Samandia, Marc struggles to conceive a viable mode of pacifism which would enable him to exist outside the realm of sectarian violence. He discovers an abandoned estate in the rainforest and believes he has found Eldon's lost Eden: "I felt I had finally reached the original home of those chance migrants...my actual haven, my real destination" (180). When he finds a wounded monkey, he chooses to nurse rather than kill it, arguing, "Evolution was not the survival of the fittest. Our evolution must come from the survival of the weak, retrieved against the odds" (186). Through Marc's seeming return to nature, the novel once more glosses Hudson's *Green Mansions*. Marc's love for Uva echoes Abel's love for Rima, which Bate describes as "an allegorical narrative of a fallen man's yearning for a reunion with nature" (60). Like Marc, Hudson's protagonist Abel yearns for paradise and his journey into the Guianan rainforest "represents the attempt of a man after the fall to return to Eden by means of willed primitivism" (Bate 58). As Abel penetrates the forest, he gradually abandons his European worldview, giving up his "instruments of calculation or domination" and sacrificing dreams of gold and geographical mastery. He undergoes a reverse evolution, becoming closer to the monkeys in the canopy of the rainforest, graceful "mountebank angels" in the "half-way heaven." However, Abel undergoes a second fall from innocence when he begins to speak of the forests as "my beloved green mansions," thus imposing European terms of ownership on the natural world (Bate 59). When he tries to seize Rima, the bird-girl, he is bitten by a poisonous snake. In his panic, he plunges over a precipice, with obvious lapsarian symbolism (Bate 59).

In *Heaven's Edge*, Marc's harmony with nature soon gives way to the will to dominate. Like his marooned predecessor, Robert Knox,<sup>34</sup> Marc assumes the role of Adam-Crusoe, imposing order on the jungle around him:

The next morning...I could see a whole day's work fall into place. How I would have to stamp my own mark on the house, shape it to my needs. I felt I

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<sup>34</sup> Earlier, Marc discovers a portrait of Knox in Farindola which emphasizes his imperial possession of the island: "a plump man in a shoulder-first pose with a flag depicting a flattened island unfurled below him" (132).

should redesign the whole place, become an inventor, an artist and a carpenter. Become my own Kris—even a Crusoe; plunder the wreck, explore the surroundings...I felt an urgent need to know more, and to be in control once again. (188)

Like Abel, Marc undergoes a backwards evolution into flight, but ends by crashing into the lake, a symbol of fall. He too colonizes his newly “discovered” paradise, declaring his aim to bring “more and more of the land under my care” (192). Earlier in the novel, Uva warns Marc that Samandia is blighted: “You’ll have to find somewhere else, make your own Eden” (29). Yet Marc tries to remake Samandia in her image, exclaiming “I wanted the garden to become her,” believing he can not only possess her body, but summon her spirit through the imposition of his desire on the landscape (193). His efforts are seemingly rewarded with success when Uva returns. Enveloped in a cloud of newly-hatched butterflies, she bursts out of the lake like the reincarnation of Samandia’s spirit.

However, Uva is terribly changed. She has abandoned her pacifist vision of eco-resistance to become an insurgent. Forming a guerrilla militia from orphaned children, she hacks through the jungle, burning bridges, attacking state outposts, refusing to pause even when the children were mutilated by bombs. Responding to Marc’s horror at her collusion with enemy methods, Uva insists: “The only way to stop a killer is by killing her, or him...Sometimes you have to sacrifice your innocence to protect this world that you care so much for” (228). Traumatized by her experiences, she lies curled in a fetal position, rejecting Marc’s advances. In *Green Mansions*, Rima’s love affair with Abel leads to her estrangement from the natural world as “she undergoes her own fall from natural into historical and geographical identity” (Bate 61). Despite his love for her, Abel “finds himself wishing to penetrate Rima’s secrets and...conquer her” (Bate 60). Encouraged by Abel to seek out her past history, Rima vacates the sacred forest to search for her birthplace. In her absence, invaders enter the jungle, and kill her on her return. Abel’s desire to return to nature thus destroys the very nature he desires (Bate 62). Marc’s relationship with Uva leads to similar alienation. Her journey ensnares her in political conflict and leads to her



sterilization, so that her emergence from the chrysalis of the lake signifies her evolution not into a butterfly, but into an infertile killer.

Marc counters Uva's doctrine of self-preservation with an appeal to community: "You are not alone. We are never entirely on our own....We repair, rebuild...Scavenge. Salvage. We must use what we discover. ...Leave things a little better for those who come after us" (227). Such "salvage" operations offer only a provisional salvation. Marc finally realizes that the fantasy of escape to Eden is impossible, that he cannot remove himself from history or return to a state of innocence. Yet, he refuses to relinquish his feelings of ownership for Samandia and is gradually persuaded to Uva's view that a temporary haven can be preserved only through violence:

I could see our lives in the days to come...The earth will be green, the sky blue. We will learn to live with small acts of self-protection, merciless deaths and the troubled acceptance of a price that will sometimes seem too high for true survival. Ours will be a need to forget as much as to remember. (230)

Throughout the novel, Marc is an unreliable narrator, vacillating between pacifism and self-preservation, between his grandfather's Buddhist values and his father's political nationalism. Their voices constitute a debate on resistance, a struggle to imagine a state without violence or to imagine an intervention that could put an end to the abuse of both the environment and humans. When Marc finally concludes that killing and amnesia are necessary to survival, it is tempting to accept his decision as the "solution" to the problem of violence posed throughout the text, as opposed to Eldon's injunction, "The art of killing cannot be our finest achievement...There is always an alternative" (100).

Yet Marc's thinking remains distorted by his determination to stay in an Eden of his own making. Ironically, it is his colonization of the land which leads enemy scouts to his plantation. The signs of ownership make it recognizable as a human-inhabited space. The soldiers butcher Marc's monkey, appearing before him with their hands red with its blood: "They had come to take everything" (234). Enraged by their

depravity, Marc and Uva slay the intruders to avenge and preserve their paradise. Instead of being immolated like Rima, Uva becomes a fallen angel of death: "She leapt on the last man with her butterfly knife opening in one hand and a sun-stained machete in the other...She slew him as she fell" (234). The novel's final image evokes the flaming sword at the gates of Eden: "The whole sky darkened as a legion of trident bats, disturbed from their brooding trees by the gunshots, took to the newly burnt air, drawing a broken eclipse over another fragile world forever altered; riven" (234). The protagonists' attempts to recreate Eden result in violence, implying that the boundary between man-made heaven and man-made hell is as slender as the edge of Uva's knife. *Heaven's Edge* sees the fall being enacted repeatedly, as in Wilson Harris's *Carnival*, where the Inferno of history surfaces perpetually in the present.

The novel's bi-focal vision, peering backwards into the island's mythical past, and forward into its possible future, might seem to echo discussions of Sri Lanka as a place outside time and beyond the real world.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, the deterioration of Uva's politics of eco-resistance and the concluding image of violent fall seem to suggest that the novel's vision of individual agency has been displaced by a paralytic conception of the island's history as metaphysical tragedy. However, historical contingencies constantly intrude on the narrative, disturbing Marc's paradise discourse, and even at the moment of the soldiers' invasion, the protagonists are portrayed as agents able to choose whether or not to resist violently. The novel's pastiche of Western and South Asian myths of Eden, flight, and return illustrates the seductive dangers of belonging and nostalgia, which can become rationales for violence, transforming would-be creators into destroyers. Gunsekera uses the paradise motif to represent the problem of remembrance for a nation struggling with the destructive legacies of colonialism and the fault-lines of ethnic and class

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<sup>35</sup> In interviews, Gunsekera explains, "In *Heaven's Edge* I was trying to go in two different directions, forward and back. Part of the story is about the myths that we grew up, returning to the world of the myth, where it comes from...The other is to try and go ahead of yourself, into the future, and so in a sense you invent both...the future and the past...The trouble about inventing the future, of course, is that the present catches up" (cited in Hall 3).



conflict.<sup>36</sup> Like Sivanandan's *When Memory Dies, Heaven's Edge* explores the perversion of true memory through propaganda and terror, which obscures the historical processes which have produced cyclical violence, social corruption, and environmental degradation and deludes people into believing that the politics of oppression can provide solutions. The novel's final question is whether fighting to preserve a homeland or sanctuary can ever exonerate violence, or whether killing for paradise always transforms it into yet another hell.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> In an interview, Gunsekera identifies the novel's central question as: "Should we remember this as a way of learning, or forget them as way of healing?" (cited in Hussein 1).

<sup>37</sup> "The journey of violence entails a choice between defending or accommodating violence. Kill or be killed yes, but by killing you're also dying" (Gunsekera in Hussein 1).

## Conclusion

“The event of promise, therefore, is the beginning of the criticism of everything that is.”

- Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope* (1964)

“Whether ritualized or not, art contains the rationality of negation. In its advanced positions, it is the Great Refusal—the protest against that which is.”

- Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man* (1964)

I have set out to demonstrate the way paradise myth functions in colonial literature as the product of a value-laden discourse related to profit, labour, and exploitation of resources, and have attempted to strip away the illusion of universality which conceals the heterogeneity of its operations, the diverse ways it has been continually repackaged, appropriated, and reconfigured in response to economic shifts in order to justify exploitation and violence in different historical, geographical, and cultural contexts. While some sameness, a yearning for that which is absent, may persist behind its myriad manifestations, it can nonetheless only be understood through the demystification of these reconfigurations and the excavation of the world of contradictions buried within them. Myths of paradise in Mexico, Tanganyika and Ceylon take on very different connotations in response to the geographical imaginaries, topographies, or climates—“Occidental” America, “empty” Africa, or “Orientalist” Asia; mainland or island; tropical or volcanic; bush or highland—and economic potentials of those specific spaces. In Mexico, the myth of the infernal paradise is inseparable from the *hacienda* and the *maquiladora*, the hope and failure of land reform, the rise of Anglo-American informal imperialism. The myth of Ophir is tied to the mines of Africa’s interior, the fair land/black coast is driven by the spice plantations and tourist hotels of Zanzibar, the “isle of dharma” harks back to a time when Ceylon seemed manageable, containable, a paradise of cinnamon and tea plantations. In neocolonial discourse, paradise serves as the handmaiden of global capitalism, shaping desires for the tourist paradise and the consumer cornucopia,



converting nostalgia for lost colonies into hunger for the postcolonial exotic. Paradise as gold-land serves to sustain imperial desire and justify imperial praxis; yet the myth of lost paradise has also been used to question and expose the material realities of colonies, to advocate reform. Similarly, anti-paradise expresses the repressed guilt of the colonizer, but it also bears witness to the potential for radical agency in the colonized, whose resistance so disturbs the European observer that it must be coded as “infernal,” “depraved,” or “savage,” and points forward to the emancipatory projects of decolonization.

For the postcolonial writers on which this thesis has focused, the paradise myth functions as something of a double-edged sword. On one hand, in its negative form it enables them to express a critique of the processes of global imperialism, to deconstruct the specific discourses which inform tourism, plantation, and consumer “paradises,” to herald and denounce environmental degradation and social corruption, and to reject originary myths of cultural or racial homogeneity. In a more positive sense, it allows writers like Gurnah and Harris to recapture a fuller sense of the multicultural past and the history of transcultural interaction between many peoples, a history which for Harris at least is revelatory of a possible future of communal, collective interaction without exploitation or hierarchical structures. As such paradise myth has functioned as a new economy allowing them to express values opposed to those of dominant political ideologies and economies. For these writers, to paraphrase Louis Marin’s first thesis of utopia, paradise is “an ideological critique of ideology” and “a critique of dominant ideology insofar as it is a reconstruction of contemporary society by means of a displacement and a projection of its structures into a fictional discourse” (Marin 195). On the other hand, the exilic logic of fall and loss associated with the fictional use of paradise produces narrative pitfalls: a crippling emphasis on guilt or transgression, a paralyzing apathy or political stasis, an ironic re-emphasis of the very notions of the Third World as exotic, fallen, or timeless which they set out to dismantle, and a vulnerability to commodification within the global market.

Given the continued and problematic viability of the paradise myth, the question remains whether it can transcend its pathologies and become utopian.<sup>1</sup> A paradise that returns always to the past is an illusion; all these authors make clear the impossibility of the fantasy of escape to Eden. We can neither remove ourselves from history nor return to a state of innocence. Paradise in its backwards-looking manifestation can only be the pursuit of a chimera, the cradling of a wound, the gaze that calcifies us into pillars of salt, frozen in our tears. Paradise as the present recreation or enjoyment of delight is equally pathological, when it is the false capitalist utopia in which each individual is enjoined to enjoy his most perverse desires, but in which desire can never be satiated, only endlessly renewed. Material paradises such as the Land of Cockaigne are “expressions of desire—desire for the effortless gratification of need and the absence of restrictive sanctions; they are not expressions of hope” (Levitas cited in Capps 97). If hope is what is possible and desire is what the individual wants irregardless of whether it is possible; the medieval utopia of excess seems impossible: cooked larks can’t fly, beer doesn’t flow in rivers. Yet, it is precisely the fantasy of over-consumption which has been made technologically possible in our age, where the only sanction is that enjoyment must be continually re-enacted. If true utopia defines what is *not* desired, the gold-land of false capitalist utopia defines what *is* desired, over and over again. Such present delight enjoyed through the exclusion or exploitation of others is not Eden, it is hell, even if the enjoyer does not realize it.

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<sup>1</sup> Another discursive pitfall which space has prohibited me from exploring at length is the gendering of the paradise myth in such a way as to reinforce patriarchal notions of the transgressive virgin/whore at the center of the lost garden. To the Consul’s guilty Adam, Lowry casts two Eves: Maria the Mexican whore, and Yvonne the martyr/adulteress. Gurnah’s naïve Yusuf is confronted with another pair of Eves, the defiled Amina, the defiling Zulekha, who never break free from the walls of their unwanted garden. Gunsekera’s Uva/Eve bucks against the limning of her character by Marc’s essentializing discourse, but functions as little more than a target for mythical constructs of woman-as-nation, her most significant role the object of the protagonist’s desire. All these authors gesture towards the ways in which the deployment of the paradise myth in connection with the discourses of nation and race and the practices of slavery and imperialism can be particularly degrading towards doubly-alienated women. Yet women remain marginal to the texts, not so much Eves freighted with blame, as invisible, expendable symbolic units. Novels by postcolonial women writers—Jamaica Kincaid’s *Annie John*, Margaret Cezair-Thompson’s *The True History of Paradise*, Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*, Michelle Cliff’s *No Telephone to Heaven*, Aminatta Forna’s *Ancestor Stones*, Marina Warner’s *Indigo* (1992)—have been more vociferous in exposing and attacking the myths of nation or island as feminized paradise which subsume women’s bodies and subjectivities within nationalist and tourist discourses.



Paradise in its millenarian form, as apocalypse, as the teleological myth of perfection wrought through violence, is yet more vicious. When implicated with the invented categories of race and nation, ideologies of perfection have led to genocide, Social Darwinism, "Eden by eradication." Yet the political idea of paradise as achieved through the murder of other people is all the more unsettling for having beneath it a distorted utopian impulse. As Slavoj Žižek remarks, the "utopian moment" is often visible in a contorted form in even the most atrocious ideology, so that even Nazism was "grounded in the utopian longing for an authentic community life, in the fully justified rejection of the irrationality of capitalist exploitation," although this rejection was displaced in the most grotesque way into the scapegoating mechanisms of anti-Semitism (Žižek 30).<sup>2</sup> One answer to the ideology of perfection might be the old Augustinian response: we are all already fallen. The longing for authentic community cannot be fulfilled through homogeneity and purity, because they do not exist; to pursue them can only result in violence. Michael Wood argues that we should do away with paradise myth altogether, because its pathologies are too deeply ingrained: "Paradise is and always was a fantasy, an expression, through myth, of deep and multiple needs and longings. We can respect these needs and longings without endorsing the myth...It has become a nuisance, positively damaging. Insofar as it hangs on at all, it ruins the possible by harrying it with the notion of the perfect" (248). Yet doing away with paradise will not resolve the deeper problems which produce the longings, nor provide a new voice for the possible.

Paradise cannot be reduced to the pathology of melancholia. There is delight to be had in reading accounts of other worlds couched in the seductive, inventive, fabulous tropes of paradise, even when these serve the interests of imperial discourse; the marvel of Columbus, the sheer imaginative energy and power of Dante and Milton, the extraordinary flexibility of the myth all retain something of what Ernst Bloch calls the "Utterly Different," "Canaan in unexplored splendour, as the wonderful" (1241).

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<sup>2</sup> "To work, the ruling ideology has to incorporate a series of features in which the exploited majority will be able to recognize its authentic longings.... the authentic popular content as well as its distortion by the relations of domination and exploitation" (Žižek 29).

Paradise is not only “the expression of desire,” the notion of the perfect, but the trace of what is *not-yet*. It does not always function as the physical territory to be purchased with blood, conquered for greed, but rather in the literary “realm of imaginary freedom,” as an expression of historical possibility. A myth of loss need not enshrine a prelapsarian past; rather it can be used to criticize existing systems, to reopen the soul to knowledge that “something’s missing,” that this is not how things were meant to be, that another mode of existence may be possible. While imperfection might be inevitable, inescapable, our acceptance of ever-increasing exploitation and inequality in this age of globalization need not be. Paradise ought to function, not as the anti-utopia which suppresses the future and vents the pressure required to generate resistance, but rather which opens the imagination to it. Paolo Freire once wrote that utopia must function in two modes, *denunciation* and *annunciation* (119). As a literary motif, paradise has achieved the former, repudiating dehumanizing situations, performing the Marcusean “Great Refusal,” the complete rejection which strikes at the roots of evil and injustice. From a myth used to justify the “bad” ideologies of imperialist expansionism and globalization, the treasure-house of mimetic capital associated with paradise has been reconfigured to express Marxist, postcolonial, feminist, and ecocritical critique. Yet, can it be revolutionary rather than merely reformist, can it become a field of creative imagination which proposes alternative values, actively realizing the rejection of what is not desired and the creation of what is?

In *Principle of Hope* (1959), Ernst Bloch argues that art can provide hope of a better future, illuminating the “unfinished project” of utopia. The material base can be transformed through superstructural developments, the mobilization of the *not-yet-conscious*, the realization of the *not-yet-become*. For Bloch, biblical myths of paradise and promised land have political significance precisely because of their origins in a “religion of opposition” (1232). The Moses story is an originary myth of rebellion against oppression, of political commitment to the goal of liberation which transforms the content of salvation from a “finished goal” to “a promised goal that must first be achieved” (1234). Israelite expectation transforms the lost land of the past into a “land



of promise,” peculiarly projecting paradise into the present, where it acts as a utopia of deliverance. Bloch acknowledges that “much that oppresses and makes people cower has accumulated in the Scriptures,” but argues “this is precisely what is added, laid on to an unsatisfied, permanently creative religion” (1235). In the late 1960s, the political theology of Jürgen Moltmann, building on Bloch’s Marxist utopianism, dared to break with Augustinianism and to imagine a new political eschatology. Paradise is neither the lost Eden of the past, a repository for melancholy, nor the heaven of the future to which all expectations should be deferred, forever *beyond*, forever detached from the misery and oppression of the earthly present. Rather, as conceived by liberation theologians, the utopian “gift of the future” should begin in the social praxis of the present, an ongoing work rooted in “active hope” yet combined with a demystifying notion of imperfection repudiating “any confusion of the Kingdom with any one historical stage...any idolatry toward unavoidably ambiguous human achievement...any absolutizing of revolution” (Gutiérrez 223). To be truly annunciatory, paradise must concretely transform historical experience, support the “emergence of a new social consciousness and new relationships among persons” (Gutiérrez 219). If it does not open paths for historical praxis, its annunciation is mere verbal wordplay, an illusion. It must be simultaneously “subversive to and a driving force of history” (Gutiérrez 218). It must look to the future, but act within the present.

Yet of the authors I have studied, only Harris admits his protagonist into the *paradiso* of the present, the rest stand with the gates of paradise barred behind them and the desert of the real before them. In the last four decades, liberation theology has “gone out of fashion,” despite the continuance, even intensification, of the oppressive conditions in which it was first forged. The end of Soviet society is frequently held to have “destroyed the utopian imagination and robbed us of part of what it is to be modern: the ability to imagine a paradise not in the world to come but in this one” (Jones 3). The ascendancy of global capitalism has come to seem wholly inevitable: irresistible, if not desirable. If I invoke the religious antecedents of utopia and paradise, it is because our so-called secular society is not so secular. Where paradise

persists, it is as the shadow of failure, or as the perverse promise of “secular salvation” through market capitalism (Pahl 68). The “aggressive proselytizing of market capitalism” has made it the “most successful religion” after the fall of communism, “winning more converts more quickly than any previous belief system or value-system” (Pahl 67). The corresponding delusion to the notion of purchasing power as political power is the quasi-religious belief that “faith in the grace of profit” will be rewarded by the “god” of the market, indeed, has already been rewarded, with the fulfilment of our desires for rapid travel, immediate entertainment, instantaneous information. Inducted into the vicious cycle of ever-increasing production and consumption, we lose our ability or motivation to believe in the possibility of change, and the potentially revolutionary social force of paradise is thus negated.

In the *Political Unconscious* (1981) Jameson writes that if the utopian prospects of the Marxian dialectic are to be realized, a dual hermeneutic must be exercised which grasps the “simultaneously ideological and Utopian character” of such phenomena as nationalism and religion (297). Otherwise, literary criticism can “scarcely hope to ‘reappropriate’ such collective energies” and “doom[s] itself to political impotence” (298). Yet two decades later, it seems as if those energies have already been appropriated by the “fundamentalism” of the free-market. In “Politics of Utopia” (2004) Jameson writes that we must revive the “waning” utopian idea, not because it provides a practical blueprint for politics in this era of globalization and historical dissociation, but because only utopia enables the imagination of radical political programs by “feebly” keeping alive “the conception of systemic otherness, of an alternate society” (36). Through the play of fantasy, an image of unalienated labour, literary utopias enable systemic critique and express moments of truth despite their ideological orientations. However, the paradox of utopia is that it is negative, “most authentic when we cannot imagine it,” thus demonstrating “our imprisonment in a non-utopian present without historicity or futurity—so as to reveal the ideological closure of the system” (46). In order to escape this “peculiarly defeatist position,” Jameson answers the paradox of negativity with one of his own: “utopias are non-fictional, even though they are also non-existent” (54).



The reappropriation of the “collective energies” of the paradise myth is made more urgent by the fact that it has already been re-politicized, particularly in the context of Islamic fundamentalism. I have attempted to suggest throughout this thesis the transnational nature of the myth: its complex, shared imaginary between Arab-Islamic and European cultures, the reworking of the medieval Christian idea of the terrestrial paradise in response to Persian, Arab, and Muslim texts, the construction of fantasies of unknown wonders and gold-lands based on knowledge exchanged through mercantile literature. Yet today, in our post-9/11 world, the rhetoric of the Western media tends to disavow paradise as the religion in which “we” no longer believe, casting it instead as a “backwards” myth fuelling the violence of a demonized “Arab” world, paradise as the tool of “terror” for psychopaths: “Mostly, nowadays, it seems paradise is what people makes people kill each other” (Jones 3). This polarization ignores the degree to which myths of paradise continue to provide a rationale for our appropriation of the resources of non-West. The fantasy of eternal bliss, of paradise as sensual reward, ought to be all too familiar in the West, where it is enjoyed not after death, but in the present. While deploring the violent methods of terrorism, it is nevertheless possible to understand the myth of “sacred space” lost to the decadent West but reclaimed through martyrdom or *jihad* as the product of an alienated community of religious believers who seek to oppose the false utopia of capitalism with their own version of paradise. As such, their myth of “paradise now” speaks of the conditions of economic deprivation and the continuing disintegration of the social in the Third World: the crucible of suffering which forges such violent strategies of resistance and despair.

It is precisely because the paradise myth persists in varied ideological guises that it must be reconfigured in literature, not to imagine the reclamation or creation of a perfect, sacred space for one religion, ethnicity, or culture, achieved through the destruction of a demonized Other, but rather to posit a *poesis* of “*caritas*, of asylum, reconciliation, just exchange” (Hogan 84). It must refuse the sacralization of violence and agonistics in favour of a community of harmonious difference, while committing

itself to the dissolution of existing structures and the emergence of new ones, voicing the “barely audible messages from a future that may never come into being” (Jameson “Politics” 54). Carlos Fuentes writes that only freedom of difference can enable the construction of true community: “Is there any paradise other than the one we can fashion with our brother and our sisters? History begs the question: how to live with the Other?” (“Buried” 89). Such is the challenge to the cultural creativity of those writers who would continue to employ the paradise myth and who believe social justice to be a matter of concern for all.



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